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This is My Stage

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Abstract

This project is an EP, for which I wrote or cowrote all the songs, acted as producer, worked with others to record, and mixed each song. During my semester in Nashville, I was asked to write a song either every week or every other week, and the songs on this EP represent about half of what I wrote over the course of the semester. Each week, instructors would tweak arrangements and the form of each song so that we could put on a concert each Thursday, and I made sure that I used our recording studio to record the best ones. All of these recordings were done in ProTools using the recording studio at the Contemporary Music Center in Nashville, and each session was moderated by Hannah Patey, Andrew Corbett, and myself. They were mixed in the studios on Cedarville's campus, and a few extra parts were added and recorded at Cedarville as well. Overall, the EP reflects a lot of my personal journey during my Nashville semester, even though very abstractly at some points, and I titled it "This is My Stage," to reflect that growth. As I want to work in the music industry after graduation, this project represents my first major step towards that goal, both in songwriting and mixing.

Strand After Strand
Cowritten with Kristina Shimkus

He dips bristles into the water cup
And onto his brush he lifts paint
His hand raises to the canvas he's propped up
The layers of his colors combine without
restraint

He's spent years and years honing his craft
And never quite receiving respect back

Blue swirls to black in a starry sky
And sunflowers stand brightly in a vase
Boats in the water with people nearby
Tables under darkness of space
Everyone thinks they understand
As they analyze strand after strand
As they analyze strand after strand

Paint dries in the corner of the room
And he forgets to eat again
He feels this is more like a tomb
Inspiration flashes can't convince his brain

He's spent years and years honing his craft
And never quite receiving respect back

Blue swirls to black in a starry sky
And sunflowers stand brightly in a vase
Boats in the water with people nearby
Tables under darkness of space
Everyone thinks they understand
As they analyze strand after strand
As they analyze strand after strand

His swirls of paint hang around the world
Who knows what would happen if he could be
told
Would he have stayed to work and fight
Or would he still have extinguished his own
light

Blue swirls to black in a starry sky
And sunflowers stand brightly in a vase
Boats in the water with people nearby
Tables under darkness of space
Nobody could ever understand
As they analyze strand after strand
As they analyze strand after strand

The idea for this song came to me after watching an episode of *Doctor Who*, in which the main characters go back in time and meet Vincent Van Gogh. Towards the end of the episode, they bring him to the future and show him museums full of his work. In history, Van Gogh was a very troubled artist, and he struggled with bipolar disorder, among other things. At the age of 37, he committed suicide. The question asked by this episode of *Doctor Who* was whether knowing the future of his work would have changed this end, and I worked off a similar thought process while writing the lyrics to this song.

The first verse is meant to evoke the image of a skilled painter at his craft, and after getting this image in the listener's head, the pre-chorus explains that the artist has never received respect for his great skill; this was true in Van Gogh's life, as he only sold one painting while he was alive. The chorus follows with a description of four of Van Gogh's most famous paintings: *The Starry Night*, *Sunflowers*, *Starry Night Over the Rhone*, and *Café Terrace at Night*. The chorus concludes with the idea that it would be very easy to look at these paintings and believe one knows what Van Gogh was thinking in his act of creation, because one can analyze every inch and every strand of canvas. This kind of knowledge, of Van Gogh's work or even facts about his life, can lead people to think they understand what he was going through.

While up to this point, the song doesn't refer to the troubled aspect of the (un-named) artist, verse two is meant to shed light on it. One assistant physician who saw Vincent believed that he was suffering from a form of epilepsy due to too much alcohol and coffee and not enough food, though an official

diagnosis was never made.¹ The second verse, as a result, generally refers to his mental illnesses and their manifestations (forgetting to eat, for example), before a repeat of the prechorus and chorus, which can now be seen in a new light with the information from the second verse. Finally, in the bridge, the song's main question is asked of the listener: if Van Gogh knew what would happen to his paintings, would he still have committed suicide? It's an unanswerable question, though many (including the *Doctor Who* episode I watched) would say no, and as the final chorus comes in, a little softer, a single line is changed to respond to the statements in the previous choruses. "Everyone thinks they understand" turns to "nobody could ever understand." No one will ever know for sure what it was like to be Vincent Van Gogh, and nobody can definitively answer the question of whether knowing his future would have affected him positively enough to save his life.

After writing the lyrics to this song, I created a demo of it with a single, fingerpicked guitar, because I liked the feeling of space and atmosphere created by the instrument. Then, for the first performance, I added a cajon and a piano, which added some movement, but maintained the same soft sound of the song. Finally, for this recorded version, the instrumentation includes a soft drumset, piano, electric guitar, bass, flute, and vocals. The decision to change out the acoustic for an electric was overwhelmingly for the tone of the electric, and after the part was added during my recording sessions, the song sounded far more atmospheric than it did originally. Bass added a lower aspect that was previously missing, and flute added atmosphere as well. The goal of the instrumentation was to reflect the feeling of *The Starry Night*. As mentioned above, the song was co-written with Kristina Shimkus; the melody for the chorus came easily once I started writing the song, and she helped to iron out the verse melodies and the chord progressions for the chorus.

One final interesting fact about the song is that weeks after writing this, I found another song written by Don McLean in 1971 called "Vincent," which is recorded simply with fingerpicked guitar and vocal.² His lyrics are similarly vivid, and in his song, he comments that "perhaps they'll listen now," after Vincent's death. A cover of the song was featured in a movie that recently came out called *Loving Vincent*, which gives more details about Van Gogh's life and death, and is painted entirely from start to finish. Both of these are good places for more information and reflection on the artist's life.

¹ "On the Verge of Insanity." Van Gogh Museum. <https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/stories/on-the-verge-of-insanity#5> (retrieved January 19, 2018).

² McLean, Don. American Pie. United Artists Records, 1971, mp3.

Superhero

Cowritten with Isaac Orellana and Kristina Shimkus, and Jordan Pohl

I don't need a superhero
Red and yellow dots to come alive
I don't need a lack of fear, oh
Iron Man can hold on tight

I don't ask for perfection
Maybe a little more intention
'Cause whenever anyone calls
They always fight with their all

Fly right in
In the nick of time, oh
Show your strength
And make time slow
Be my partner in crime
I don't need a superhero

Yes, I know they have their flaws
But it always seems to work out in the end
Captains have the strength to fight through loss
And loyalty rarely bends

I don't ask for perfection
Maybe a little more intention
'Cause whenever anyone calls

They always fight with their all

Fly right in
In the nick of time, oh
Show your strength
And make time slow
Be my partner in crime
I don't need a superhero

You can't make time freeze
You'll never be
A hero, villain, sidekick
So just please

Fly right in
In the nick of time, oh
Show your strength
And make time slow
Fly right in
In the nick of time, oh
Show your strength
And make time slow
Be my partner in crime
I don't need a superhero

This song is interesting to me, thinking back, because it's the song where the lyrics changed most drastically from my first demo to final draft. Originally, I started with the line "I don't need a superhero," and worked from there, knowing that I wanted to put a lot of comic imagery into the song, and while I thought it was going to draw more from jazz, I love how it turned out.

The first verse begins with that first line that popped into my head, and I'm essentially saying that I don't need someone to come save me. But as the pre-chorus begins, it becomes a little clearer what I need, if not a superhero: someone who can learn from what superheroes have modeled, someone who can treat others so intentionally that they are a hero of their own. In the chorus, I clarify this a little more – I want a partner in crime, a best friend, not someone to save me. The original lyrics actually read, "I don't need a superhero, but I'd really like a friend." What is especially strong about this revised chorus, though, is all the action words, and some stereotypes from comics themselves (in the nick of time, for example). The language in the chorus is meant to invoke images commonly associated with superheroes before turning the audience's expectations upside down and applying those images to a requested partner in crime. One of the things I ask of such a partner is the ability to make time slow, because when you're with someone you love, you always want your time with them to last (though to be clear, this song is not about romantic love, but platonic love). In the second verse, I address some of the objections to my request, and clarify what I'm looking for from someone. Superheroes have flaws, but their strength and loyalty, along with the intentionality previously mentioned, is admirable. The main point is clarified one final time in the bridge; the person I'm talking to will never have superpowers. But that's not what I require from them. I simply require a friend.

At the time I wrote this, I was three weeks into the CMC, and after moving to a new place with a lot of new people, I was feeling lonely, especially since I was coming out of a junior year filled with friendship troubles. It's interesting to look back on it now, because in a way, almost everyone at CMC became one of those "partners in crime" at one point or another.

This song was cowritten by Kristina Shimkus, who helped me iron out some of my original chords, and Isaac Orellana, who helped me bounce around lyrical, melodic, and chordal ideas when I rewrote the chorus. Jordan Pohl also helped to change one of the lines in the chorus. For the original performance, the instrumentation was acoustic, electric, drums, piano, bass, background vocals, and vocals. And while that sounded good, it felt like it was trying to drag the song farther into a "rock" feel than it could comfortably go. For this recorded version, I asked a different friend to play electric, and he made the part more acoustic sounding. I've also added extra background vocals and a synth.

Verona

Cowritten by Isaac Orellana and Kristina Shimkus

My shaking hands
Press tape against the cold stone
My note breathes with the wind
To send my call to you

Words never said, face to face
But if we pretend, all will fall into place

Verona is ours tonight
Underneath all the lights
You've caught my eye
You've caught my eye
You know that we can't delay
Our time is slipping away
And this is our stage
This is our stage

I know I'm not a poet
But tonight I leave all of me

In this heartfelt note
On the heartbreak balcony

Words never said, face to face
But if we pretend, all will fall into place

Verona is ours tonight
Underneath all the lights
You've caught my eye
You've caught my eye
You know that we can't delay
Our time is slipping away
And this is our stage
This is our stage



I don't know if you'll ever see this
I don't know if you'd recognize my
hand
Would you even know that it was me
A few minutes divide our visits
But it makes all the difference
Between our hearts
Between our minds
But I missed you by a mile

Verona is ours tonight
Underneath all the lights
You've caught my eye
You've caught my eye
You know that we can't delay
Our time is slipping away
And this is our stage
This is our stage

This was the first official co-write of the semester, when we were put into groups and asked to write a song about a person or place. The place my group chose was the Romeo & Juliet balcony, where to this day, people leave love notes, as pictured. For the most part, I was in charge of lyrics, and Kristina and Isaac wrote the piano and guitar parts, but we all had input into all decisions that were made. The choice to make it a duet was mostly due to the story and co-writing aspect of the assignment, and it was an extra challenge since none of us had written a duet before. Previous to this, I also hadn't written a love song before.

When we found this image, we decided to come up with a story before writing any lyrics to accompany it, and we imagined a man and a woman who met each other and fell in love, but they never told each other of their affections. Neither were from Verona, and both came to post love notes to the other at the balcony. However, they didn't know the other was coming, and their visits were only a few minutes apart. In the end, they never got to say the words in person or see each other's notes. It's bittersweet, in much the same way the cultural imagination of *Romeo and Juliet* is.

The first verse is narrated by "him," and is sung by Isaac Orellana, narrating the posting of the first note, as "he" tapes it to the wall, imagining the wind sending the note to his beloved. This is followed by the pre-chorus, which introduces for the first time the idea that these words were never said in person, and that both parties are merely pretending there is a possible future for their love. The chorus invokes two images: the first, that even with all the bright and sparkling lights in the city, a specific person has

caught the narrator's eye. The second, the idea, taken from Shakespeare, that "the world's a stage," and that they need to begin their story before they run out of time. Verse two, sung by me, narrates the posting of the second note, and is followed by another pre-chorus and chorus. The bridge finally reveals the tragic part of this story: neither of the lovers know if the other will ever see their note, or if they would even be able to recognize their handwriting. They miss each other by a few minutes, and in the end, that's equivalent to being miles apart at the crucial moment of their lives. The final chorus can be viewed slightly differently after this bridge, with the knowledge that the lovers' story was played out, but that the song is their only stage.

The recorded version of this song is nearly the same as the original performed version, and includes two vocalists, one background vocalist, piano, drums, acoustic, cello, and harp. The choice to have a cello was simply because the song was beautiful, and I thought that including a cello would increase the emotional effect and make the sound richer overall. In addition, the addition of the harp in this version was meant to add an extra drive; the arpeggios in the background help to create some more tension than was there previously.

Swan Song
Cowritten with Jonah Krull

My trunk slams on the last cardboard box
And it's humid and wet outside
The building's empty, we've checked the locks
It's a vagabond's life this time

But in all this coming and going
I'm figuring out what's worth knowing

'Cause every hello ends in goodbye
And borders crossed are crossed once more
I miss when that town was mine
I'm waiting for my bags to hit the floor
But the sun is setting soon
I'll be home in June
Here's my last swan song

I can see the road signs passing by
As I'm speeding away from you
I think of the day we said goodbye
And how we never thought we could make it
through

But in all this coming and going
I'm figuring out what's worth knowing

'Cause every hello ends in goodbye
And borders crossed are crossed once more
I miss when that town was mine
I'm waiting for my bags to hit the floor
But the sun is setting soon
I'll be home in June
Here's my last swan song

It's been so long since I've had one home
And that's all I want tonight
But that would mean we're nearing the end
And I don't want to say goodbye

Every hello ends in goodbye
And borders crossed are crossed once more
I miss when that town was mine
I'm waiting for my bags to hit the floor
But now I follow the moon
I'm coming home soon
Here's my last swan song

This was the final song I wrote at CMC. Our final concert was about a month or so before we left for tour, but even that early, we were feeling the loss that leaving would be. This song was co-written with Jonah Krull, who came up with the guitar parts as well as some of the melodic hooks.

The first verse of the song imagines the day I'm leaving the CMC: packing up my car outside our apartment, empty and locked. One of the things I dealt with in leaving the CMC was that ever since I've been in college, I must leave every time I get accustomed to a place. Whenever I get used to being home again, it's time to go back to college, and vice versa. After only three months in Nashville, it felt like more of a home than Cedarville ever has, and I felt I belonged there almost as much as I've always felt I belonged in Michigan. This is reflected in the line "It's a vagabond's life this time," and is followed by the pre-chorus, where I reflect that in all this moving around, I'm finding what's important. The chorus is the meat of the song, and reflects a lot of the thoughts and feelings I had as I was thinking about leaving. Every time I meet new people, the goodbye is inevitable. Every time I cross borders into a different state, they're crossed again as I return home. I miss when I had a town to call my own, and I'm waiting for the day I can consider myself settled again, but my time in Nashville came to a close, and my time in Cedarville is ending too ("I'll be home in June"). The final line in the chorus is self-referential in some ways, as this truly was my last song in Nashville. The title, used in this final line, comes from a belief that swans sing a final, beautiful song, just before they die, and the phrase is used metaphorically as "a farewell appearance or final act or pronouncement," according to Merriam-Webster.³ The final line, then, is two-fold. The song is my final act in Nashville, but I also hope that it's my last time saying goodbye. Of course, I'm leaving Cedarville soon, but in my heart, I said goodbye to this university when I packed my bags for Nashville. Similarly, I said goodbye to Michigan, at some level, when I came to Cedarville, though Michigan will always be a home.

The second verse brings the listener back to that final day in Nashville as I'm driving away from the ones I love, thinking of how difficult it was to say goodbye. The pre-chorus and chorus repeat. If not already clear, this song is one of mixed feelings – while I wanted to be settled, I didn't want to leave where I was, though that was necessary to move towards a day where I am settled. The bridge reflects that sentiment a little more head-on, saying that it's been so long since I've had a single place where my life takes place, and I have a deep longing for that ("that's all I want tonight"). But having that would mean I've said goodbye to my Nashville family, and that my time there has ended, which I didn't want either. The chorus repeats one last time, and can be interpreted slightly different than the other choruses. At this point in the song, I know I'm going to have to say goodbye and leave. I now miss when Nashville was my town, and I'm waiting to be settled, hopefully there. The next two lines are different from previous choruses: the sun has now set on my time in Nashville, so now I follow the moon, and rather than being home in June, I'm coming home soon. The reality has set in, and I'm a lot closer to the end than I wanted to admit in the first two choruses. And for the final time, it's my last swan song.

The instrumentation for this song includes drums, bass, rhythm acoustic, lead acoustic, piano, background vocals, and vocals. The genre is clearly country, but it's far more acoustic than either of the other country songs we wrote: "Dear Haley" and "The Plains" (neither of which are included in this presentation). I wanted a more intimate sound, so we didn't include any electrics.

³ Merriam-Webster, s.v. "Swan Song," accessed January 20, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/swan%20song>.

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