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Songs from the Willow Tree:
Staging Collective Inspiration for Creative Songwriting

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INTRODUCTION

Songs from the Willow Tree is a creative thesis that explores how inspiration can be sought and applied to the songwriting process. I produced creative works that centered on people's shared experiences in life. My thesis does not serve as an academic commentary on human emotion or the psyche or make objective claims about the human experience. Rather, *Songs from the Willow Tree* presents a picture of people's common experiences and ideas that were sampled in a specific social context.

Although a creative thesis is not the most common form for an honors thesis, this thesis is nonetheless a product of an honors-supplemented undergraduate experience. Different courses gave me crucial pieces of understanding that shaped this project. An Artistic Experience course taught me to explore self and to recognize that personal experience is critical for understanding and creating art. It cemented my infatuation with and dedication to art and creativity. A course called Quest taught me that life and experience is complex. I learned what to question, how to question, and why to question. History courses showed me that often truth lies in a synthesis of differing perspectives. I again learned to question and learned to deny surface level understanding as sufficient. Anthropology and Women's Studies reminded me that all people's perspectives have value and taught me how to respectfully and intelligently explore them. And this list is not comprehensive. Each one of them grew me, showed me how to understand, how to desire understanding, and that expansion of my creative mind led to *Songs of the Willow Tree*. I am sure it will lead to much more.

The concept for *Songs from the Willow Tree* was inspired by two primary sources. The first source was a project out of New York City called *Humans of New York* created by Brandon Stanton. The project began with Stanton's desire to photograph 10,000 people. Stanton said in an interview with National Public Radio that he "struck upon this kind of crazy idea that [he] was going to go to New York and stop 10,000 people on the streets and take their portrait, and create kind of a photographic census of the city" (quoted in "In 10,000 Snaps...", 2015). He began posting through a blog that immediately became popular and grew exponentially. *Humans of New York* is now a best-selling book with multiple iterations; it has a huge following on multiple social media platforms. Stanton recognizes that the project is one that has grown from its original form and intentions. He emphasizes that it has really become a means of storytelling. And the premise is simple. Stanton talks to people, mostly random strangers, and asks them questions or asks them about their story (Stanton). He often asks questions--simple questions--like the ones used in this project such as "What is the happiest moment of your life that you can remember?" or "What do you like most about your brother/sister?" He then posts and publishes the answers or stories that people give him with a picture. Photographs attach humanity to the words. The beauty is in people's simple yet profound responses, and the depth and solidarity borne out of the project greatly inspired me. The non-academic take of a stranger on commonly known experiences, feelings, and relationships has the potential to yield beauty and power and community, and I wanted to try some version of that myself.

While the second source did not explicitly end up being relevant to the final product, it was important in creating a base of inspiration for the project. This second source of inspiration is an allegorical series of paintings by Thomas Cole called *The Voyage of Life*. I first encountered the piece in 2014 in the National Gallery of Art. The series follows a pilgrim through vast landscapes representing four stages of life: childhood, youth, manhood, and old age. Each piece possesses shared, changing, and unique elements that speak to the substance of what it means to exist in those life stages. I found the pieces stunningly beautiful and the allegorical elements incredibly intriguing. I was so impressed that the memory of the series unintentionally worked its way to the forefront of my mind as the project first began develop a year and a half later. Perhaps some pieces of inspiration did linger in the sense that both *The Voyage of Life* and *Songs from the Willow Tree* sought to explore specific themes related to people's common biographies.

Another, more secondary source of inspiration was a gathering called "Carter Night." This night was born out of the Artistic Experience course, a requirement in the University Honors Scholar curriculum. It consists of our class coming together and sharing art in a space of particular openness. These gatherings planted a seed in my mind that vulnerability in the expression of art can create an environment that encourages openness. To some degree, the collection of people's experiences (which will be discussed shortly) hinged on this potential.

IDEA COLLECTION PROCESS

The collection of inspiration for the project combined a systematic and artistic approach. With the help of my thesis mentor, Dr. Martha Copp, I learned how to gather and analyze qualitative (text) data. The collection portion of this project included developing questions and deciding how and where people could answer them. In general, the questions that came to be used in this project were the same as or similar to the ones used by Brandon Stanton in the *Humans of New York* project. They were intended to focus on some of the highs and lows of human experience and are listed as follows with their abbreviated forms in parentheses:

- **What is the happiest moment of your life that you remember? (Happiest)**
- **What is the saddest moment of your life that you remember? (Saddest)**
- **If you could give everyone a piece of advice, what would it be? (Advice)**
- **What is the biggest concern in your life right now? (Concern)**
- **Who would you like/want to be when you grow up? All ages please answer!**

(Grow Up)

These questions were largely chosen for their open-endedness and potential to access a broad range of experiences. A balance was struck in each question between encouraging thought and openness, while also being accessible and simple enough to answer in a few sentences. While the first three questions were easily decided upon, the latter two required more deliberation. The question regarding concern originally used the word “struggle” instead of “concern.” This seemed problematic because it assumed the individual was experiencing a struggle and suggested that they faced

multiple struggles. The word was changed to “concern” in order to make it easily accessible and less leading. The final question originally appeared with the word “what” in place of the word “who.” A change was made in hopes of yielding a broader set of responses; rather than prompt people to identify career or occupational goals, I hoped they would share more abstract, personal developmental goals.

In the preliminary stages of discussing the project, Dr. Copp suggested in passing the idea of an open mic session. We eventually decided that an open mic would be an ideal way to efficiently and effectively generate a shared experience for a group of people and then use that opportunity to have them voluntarily answer the questions I developed. I then printed the questions on a single sheet of thick paper on which people could anonymously write their answers. A major guiding factor in this was ensuring that potential respondents would feel comfortable enough to contribute to the project. We hoped to accomplish the establishment of a comfortable environment in several ways. First, The Willow Tree Coffeehouse in Johnson City, TN was chosen because it possesses what I perceived to be a generally relaxed and participative atmosphere. Secondly, having the questions printed helped to contribute a couple of things. (1) It allowed me to be removed from the delivery and uptake process which enforced the idea of anonymity for the participating individuals. (A friend gave out the sheets and pencils and pens, and then he also took them up and put them in a box.) (2) Because I did not have to hand out or take up forms, I was free to perform original pieces while the questions were answered. The hope was that this would facilitate the feeling of an exchange between me and the crowd--my openness encouraging their openness.

Thirdly, an explanatory script was composed and placed at the top of the form to explain the project, request participation, and assure anonymity. Ultimately, it was the collection night on February 14, 2016 that led to the final title for the project: *Songs from the Willow Tree*.

CODING

A single attempt at response gathering resulted in the collection thirty-four sets of answers (or data). It is important to note that not every person answered every question on the form, but the majority did. The next step was to make sense of the data, or turn data into an informational foundation for me to initiate a songwriting process. The chosen method by which this sense-making happened was qualitative coding. Coding involves teasing out categories from a set of data in order to better understand and analyze what is presented. The goal was to stay true to what the respondents said while generalizing the meanings conveyed in people's words. Important in this process was for me to avoid introducing bias through my feelings as I coded people's responses. This does not mean my biases were removed or ignored in the process. In fact, the very opposite was true. I answered each question myself and studied the potential sources of bias that could emerge. (see Kleinman and Copp, 1993:57-62).

I performed line-by-line coding. Qualitative methodologist and sociologist Kathy Charmaz suggests that "[l]ine-by-line coding helps you to see the familiar in new light," which to an extent parallels the story of artistic expression (Charmaz 142). It seeks to bathe the familiar in new light, more light, less light, different colored light. Line-by-line

coding grounds the analysis and forces new types of exploration by breaking up the data up into lines and evaluating them individually (Charmaz). The coding for this project was done question by question. Each line of every person's answer was examined, and themes gathered were compared among all answers for each question. What follows is the collection of themes coded for each question. It is comprehensive in terms of themes found but not in terms of frequency. Extrapolated themes are ones either derived from what was directly represented or used to encapsulate several themes under a broader idea. The themes in bold are ones that either appeared most frequently across answers and/or were found to be particularly useful or inspiring in the songwriting process:

Happiest:

- Coded: First / "Liking" Someone / **Relationship/Bonds (Family, Romantic, Friendship)** / Reciprocation / **Love** / Milestones / Achievement / Giving / Progress / Goal-fulfillment / Art Experience / **Familiar Experience** / Spirituality / Serenity / Nature / Belonging / Athletics / Reconciliation / Simplicity / The Unexpected / **Presence** / Current Moment / Location / Music / Weather / Animal / **No Singular Moment (Daily, Often, Many, Every Moment)**
- Extrapolated: **Uncertainty / Overcoming**

Saddest:

- Coded: **Loss: (Death, Divorce)** / **Love** / Animal / Suffering of Another / Heartache / **First Time** / Marriage / **Newness** / **Family (Parents, Grandparents,**

Spouse, Children) / Friend / Failure / Lack of Reciprocation / Ideas / Surprise or Suddenness / Loneliness / Empathetic Sadness / Division / Youth

- Extrapolated: **Altered Status Quo / Ending, Adjustment / Conflict / Loss of Specific**

Advice:

- Coded: **Love (Self and Other Focused) / Progress / Learning / Time / Other Focus / God / Love / Happiness / Forgiveness / Emotions / Focus on Self / Wariness / Action / Joy / Compassion / Patience / Hope / Confront Struggle /**
- Extrapolated: **Mindfulness / Love as Priority / General Prioritizing / Optimism / Acceptance / Movement**

Concern:

- Coded: Career / **Future / Limits / Control / Self / Society / Humanity / Regret / Living Well / Love / Companionship / Money / School / Peace / Success / Decisions / Family / Time / Emotional Health / Mental Health / Change / Uncertainty / Illness / Legal / Aging / Friends**
- Extrapolated: **General Uncertainty / General Decision Making / Compromise / Multidimensional / Self vs World**

Grow Up:

- Coded: **Career (General and Specific) / Art / Best Self / Happy / Never Grow Up / Regain Childhood / Parent / Other Focused / Unique / Bold / Brave / Like a Specific Person / Travel / Unclear / Humble / Relationships**
- Extrapolated: Making a Difference

TRANSLATION

For the purposes of this thesis, the word “translation” refers to the deliberate application of coded themes as guides for the songwriting process. As I described in the section on coding, each question produced multiple inspiring themes. These guiding themes were the ones most consistent across responses or ones that I found particularly inspiring. Different themes informed different aspects of each song from playing style to specific words or even letter choices for their sounds. Although different parts of each song were informed by different sources, they became complementary under the umbrella of the broad “category” being explored. The best way to understand the translation is through an analysis of the individual works that follow.

“Odysseus Heart”

Poseidon, get out of the way (1)
This journey can't last another day
Oh, some giants must lose an eye
For this traveler to survive

Calypso, let go your grasp (5)
This moment must be left in the past
Oh, I thought I was sure, but now I know
You're not happiness, You just wear her clothes

Odysseus Heart (9)
Carry on, Carry home
Home, skin and bones

Happiness smells so much like home (12)
Looks like familiar, Feels like being known
Oh, it tastes like love seasoned unique
Sounds like close hearts beating in sync

Odysseus Heart (16)
Carry on, Carry home
Home, skin and bones

“Odysseus Heart” Process

Music

The musical choices for this song were primarily inspired and informed by the idea of uncertainty and the related theme of overcoming said uncertainty. Responses to

the question about happiness communicated the idea that often the happiest moments were highlighted as such because they followed moments of difficulty. Happiness for many of the respondents was a feeling of arrival into a place of certainty, a result of overcoming. Commonly, the musical representation of happiness comes in the form of major keys and chords, medium to high tempos, lively playing, etc. While these elements are clearly present in the song, an examination of themes would not allow me to limit the expression to those elements. The song is written in the major key of C and does carry a brighter tempo, but the verses are quite dissonant (Cmaj7, C, Am7b5, Fadd9) and shifting, contrasting with the chords used in the chorus (C in multiple voicings, Cadd9, Am, F). The intent was to capture movement and reflect the journey described in the lyrics. In addition, the actual playing style moves from cautious and uncertain in the first verse to confident with full strumming in the chorus and beyond. Tempo also increases in the same manner.

Lyrics

The lyrics of the song were also informed by the themes of uncertainty and overcoming, but a couple of other themes played a part as well. Happiness for many was attached to relationships, whether they be friendships, familial relationships, or romantic relationships. Associated with this theme was the theme of presence. The emergent idea in people's reports of their happiest moments involved the presence of a person or environment. All of this brought to my mind the story of Odysseus, the Greek king and warrior from Homer's *Odyssey*, who spent years making the journey home to

his wife and son from the Trojan war. It became an excellent metaphor to communicate a movement into happiness.

Poseidon is perhaps the greatest antagonist of the *Odyssey*. Odysseus regularly struggles against the god's opposition to his progress, which largely becomes a problem after Odysseus blinds the giant Cyclops and son of Poseidon, Polyphemus, who had captured him and his men. Lines 1-4 represent the struggle against those things that stand in the way of happiest moments. They recognize that the movement into happiness may be both a journey and a struggle, that for many is preferably as short as possible. Lines 5-8 get at the idea of distraction. There are factors that may contribute to uncertainty in terms of what will lead to happiness or even what happiness actually looks like. For Odysseus, the uncertainty was predicated by the nymph, Calypso.

The chorus, like in lines 9-11, gets at the essence of the piece. The heart is often the traveller seeking home. The heart plays the part of Odysseus, and for many of the contributors, that home to which he travels is made of "skin and bones." Skin and bones here refers back to the themes of relationship and presence. Home is people. Home is presence. The theme of presence is continued to into the second verse. Lines 12-15 explore the experience of presence as the combination of the senses. Lines 13-15 specifically attempt to capture the idea of close relationships. Line 15 comes from the report of a study out of UC Davis that suggests heartbeats of close individuals may synchronize with one another (Nikos-Rose).

“Losing You”

Long live yesterday (1)
Where the air still held your scent
And lungs learned half measures
Sharing oxygen

I'm new at this, losing you (5)
And this status quo
And this favorite view
I'll level out
It might take a few
But I'm better now from loving you

Speak slow present tense (11)
I'm foreign to this place
Sleepy senses find your feet
But please keep a turtle pace

I'm new at this, losing you (15)
And this status quo
And this favorite view
I'll level out
I might take a few
But I'm better now from loving you

This is my first time...losing you (21)
I had the best time...loving you

Long live yesterday (23)
Where the air still held your scent

“Losing You” Breakdown

Music

What is the saddest moment of your life that you remember? When writing a song about sadness, my initial inclination is to tend toward a theme that is minor and dark. The coded themes coming from this question directed the songwriting in a different direction. The themes that informed the direction of this piece musically were loss of someone or something loved, adjustment, an altered status quo, and endings. This translated musically into an attempt at communicating heaviness, longing, and the pursuit of resolve rather than darkness in a minor key. I approached this in a couple of ways. First, I used full and sustained chords that, in the verses, moved downward with octave bass notes (D to C to Bb) representing movement into sadness. The music in the verse also moves from dissonant chords (Dm7, F/C, BbMajor7(add9)) ultimately into resolve (F) representing the desire to adjust following a loss. Second, I chose a melody for the chorus that would sound to some degree as though each note was being found for the first time as it approached. Additionally, I wanted to end the song abruptly and bit a harshly in order to circle back to the theme of sadness being emotionally tied to the end of of something. The key was chosen primarily for vocal comfort and the intangible “it felt right.”

Lyrics

The lyrics of this song were guided by the same themes as the music: loss of someone or something loved, adjustment, an altered status quo, and endings, with the addition of the theme of a “first time” loss. Loss was the overarching informing theme lyrically. The other themes are extensions of that idea. I was struck by the idea that

some part of sadness in the face of loss seemed to be attached to fondness and positive feelings before the loss, a sort of negative of the movement indicated by *Odysseus Heart*. This idea was represented specifically in lines 7 and 10 of the chorus and line 22 in the bridge. Adjustment to an altered status quo was a highly informative theme in this song, and it is explicitly expressed in the chorus. Additionally, the verses lend themselves to this theme, as well as the theme of longing. Lines 3 and 4 speak to a sharing of space that comes into play with close relationships. Lungs are learning to breathe without the presence of another set of lungs to share the air. Lines 11-14 speak to the idea that adjustment to a new status quo is very much a process, and while there is a longing for resolve, there can also be a hesitancy to move too quickly. In general, I also tried to utilize beginning consonants that I could linger on such as the “L’s” in lines 1 and 3, the “S’s” in lines 11 and 13, and the “F’s” in line 13.

“Keep Swimming”

If I had one piece of advice (1)
It'd be to keep hope alive

When it comes down to it, just know (3)
If you run, just run
To the light love
And if you fall, keep running
Till it's bright enough (7)
To illuminate, the masterpiece you are
You've all you need, you come from stars

If I had one piece of advice (10)
It'd be to keep hope alive
Keep love on your side
And just keep swimming,
Just keep swimming

When it comes down to it, you might (15)
Not know what you don't know
It's a process
But you'll get by with some patience
And mindfulness (19)
Everybody's guessing, No one's made of stone
And even still, Soon you'll build up your Rome

If I had one piece of advice (22)
It'd be to keep hope alive
Keep love on your side
And just keep swimming,
Just keep swimming

There's hope on the other side (27)
There's hope that you will survive
It's all gonna be alright
Just keep swimming, keep swimming

“Keep Swimming” Process

Music

Musically the creative process for this song shifted beyond the uncovered themes with which I started. The inspiration was much more feeling-based following the consideration of question, answers, and themes, making a verbalization more difficult and imprecise. The song is generally light and sure with an intended heavy and steady beat played in support. The themes of hope and movement most guided this aspect of the song, inspiring steadiness and a sureness.

Lyrics

Given that this song was written as a reflection of advice, I wanted it to be the most plain and accessible song in the project. Themes of acceptance (of self and circumstances), love (of self and others) as a priority, progress and learning, mindfulness, and movement informed the lyrics in a particularly straightforward way in contrast with the other songs. The chorus focuses on hope, love, and movement. There is a recognized irony in the fact that line 10 speaks of one piece of advice, but it is then followed by lines 11-14 give different pieces of advice. This is a tribute to the idea that different pieces of advice can be complementary and synthesized into workable

guidelines. Advice here is more a compass pointing north than it is a map dictating the specifics of how one should traverse the terrain. All these small pieces of advice point north. Line 9 is a metaphor that may not be entirely accessible. It essentially references the idea that the elements that compose our bodies are the elements of the universe and are potentially the remnants of long dead stars. "You've all you need." Lines 20 and 21 are a reflection of the encouragement caught up in the themes. It emphasizes the shared uncertainty that all of us face, while suggesting that fully informed surety is not a necessity for progress.

“What’s Gonna Happen to Me”

Hmmm?, Hmmm? (1)

Fins won’t climb a tree (2)
And these wings ain’t swimmin’ seas
They say we make our destiny
But I’ve no lemons
And if I made lemonade (6)
Let’s say I gave it all away
Was really loved but rarely paid
Would that be livin’?

Hmmm?, Hmmm? (10)

The willow asks not why (11)
Just stretches broad and seeks the sky
But I’ve mind that thinks it’s eyes
It’s forward focused
Is forward proper form (15)
Or will I yield to fit the norm?
Do we survive past being born
By hocus?

Hmmm?, Hmmm? (19)

I can’t keep from askin’
What’s gonna happen
To me

Found an old eight ball (23)
Soon after that I found the gall
To ask “am I happy after all?”
And it said maybe

“What’s Gonna Happen to Me” Process

Music

I enjoyed writing *What’s Gonna Happen to Me* more than any of the others written for the project. It is perhaps the most complex metaphorically as well of the most highly informed by the themes I analyzed. The major informative theme for this song was that of uncertainty. From that theme, I extrapolated that uncertainty is tied to limitations. Those limitations may be imposed by time, by understanding, by the environment, or by many other factors, but the key for me here was that limitations are a common predecessor of uncertainty.

This combination of themes informed the musical construction of the song, and the ukulele was the perfect instrument to use as a tool of reflection. It is an instrument that naturally possesses higher voice and carries far. In the same way, this question carries far. I used these themes to direct the musicality of the song in a few ways. First, I constrained my use of chords for the song. *What’s Gonna Happen to Me* uses just three simple chords (G, Dm, Am) with a couple of augmentations thrown in for movement. Second, I chose to play the song primarily using fingerpicking to suggest a tentative style of play in contrast to assured strumming. Third, I chose an odd structure for the song. I wanted the movement of the song itself to be a bit of a question.

Lyrics

Again, this song was highly guided by the themes inspired by respondents, and even ideas from specific answers were used to fill out lyrical concepts. In general, I

wanted to make *What's Gonna Happen to Me* simultaneously plain in terms its language but also complicated in terms of metaphor. This helped capture the idea that the question is singular but multifaceted and potentially very difficult to answer. The song is full of questions, and follows a lyrical progression that moves cyclically from verse to chorus. The complexity of the questions contained in the first verse smooth into the simple "Hmmm?" like in lines 1, 10, 19. Those lines are questions limited to some degree by uncertainty in the same way as the music. At the same time, the song progresses from metaphorically complex at the beginning to more simple at the end. The second verse is less complex than the first, and the third is less complex than the second. My intention was to represent a building with time that could be seen as surrender to or confidence in asking the question more plainly. For example, lines 6-9 ask about making lemonade and line 25 asks "[A]m I happy after all?"

Approximately half of each verse addresses at least one theme independently, and the halves connect interdependently as a metaphor by the middle lines (5 and 6, 14 and 15). Lines 2 and 3 were inspired by the theme of self-fulfillment and the quote: "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid." The source of this quote is disputed, but the value is not in the originator; it is in the idea. It captures the idea that often success is measured by a set of arbitrary metrics that do not equally apply to everyone. Attempting to determine one's future can be complicated by knowing that one may navigate a world not necessarily built for that individual. Lines 4-5 reflect the adage "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade." Lines 5-9 again address uncertainty. Line 5 does so by

questioning the starting point. Lines 6-9 move past 5 and assumes that the metaphorical lemons (tools, skills, opportunity, etc.) are present. This part of the verse addresses the theme of decision in general, but also a specific theme of whether an individual should or will be internally or externally focused going forward. The latter theme was expressed independently of the first. Additionally, these lines attempt to reflect a theme regarding concern that what happens in the future may come down to difficult compromise, especially in considerations of internal versus external focus.

The first half of the second verse (lines 11-14) seek capture the idea that something separating us as living things from other living things is our in-depth consideration of the future. The future was a major theme here. Lines 11 and 12: trees do not ask why or where or how to grow as we do. Lines: 13 and 14: we look forward to the future, to what is before us in the same as our eyes are pointed forward. Lines 15-18 again seek to address themes of uncertainty, compromise, the future, and self-actualization. Lines 17 and 18 specifically suggest that, given the difficulty of grappling with the question at hand, the options may be compromise or something intangible and not completely understood.

The final verse surrenders to the uncertainty. I attempted to avoid placing a value judgment on that concession. For some that may mean peace, and for some it may be terrifying. The verse simply acknowledges that the question will necessarily always be a question one way or another. The eight ball to which I refer is the toy Magic 8 Ball. You ask it a question, shake the ball, and it reveals an answer. In this case, the answer to “What’s Gonna happen to me” is often, as the final line suggests, “maybe.”

Grow Up

The lack of a song for this question is potentially as meaningful as the songs produced as a result of the other questions. I started with assumptions about what type of answer and thus themes the question would yield. This question was formulated specifically to avoid answers related to careers or occupations; my goal was to write questions as openly as possible. I mistakenly and perhaps naively assumed that this deliberate phrasing of the question would direct answers toward the abstract. The coded themes of people's responses were primarily either career focused or vague enough to confound the process for this question. This left me as an artist at the mercy of both inspiration and even ability. The absence brought to light a couple of very interesting ideas. One idea is that my answers and experiential relationship to the concepts are critical to my understanding. It may very well be the case that, because I was in a moment of significant uncertainty regarding the question in my own life, it stifled my ability to successfully access what was required to develop a "non-forced" creative work.

This wariness of producing a "forced" creative work points to another idea. While creativity and art may require certain types of research, the aims of creativity may need to be loose and require feeling-based decision making. Sometimes beautiful parts of a creative process can come from the unintended. Again, an attempt at avoiding answers about work produced answers about work nonetheless. Poetically, those answers then had the effect of constraining the creative process and making the project feel like a job rather than a journey. When difficulties arise in a process, it is the creator's prerogative

to make decisions regarding a piece or project, and this for me was an exploration of my comfort in exercising this ability. Finally, this result serves as reminder that, despite the deliberation and intent involved, this was still an abstract and creative project. It is a testament to the fact that picking the right questions on the way to achieving artistic ends is a specific type of journey. It must be approached differently than questions that seek a research-related snapshot of experience.

CONCLUSION

Although *Songs from the Willow Tree* had to reach a finishing point, the inspiration and meaning derived from the process does not die with signatures and presentations. The lessons learned will carry inspirational significance indefinitely. I have been given new tools by which to access my environment through art. Even as this project comes to close, I still cannot answer this question of “Who would you like/want to be when you grow up?” That does not mean I will never be able to answer that question. There has been no song written in reference to this question. That does not mean there will never be. Investing intellectually and emotionally in this project has moved me closer to a point of understanding. Ironically, I have grown more comfortable in letting the art speak for itself while doing a project that necessarily requires a thorough explanation of art.

The analyst and the artist: these two core facets of my identity are often at war with one another, but everyday I learn to find better harmony between the two. Being a University Honors Scholar has helped to shaped me into someone more readily able to find a synthesis between the systematic and the creative. *Songs from the Willow Tree* is a result and a representation of this synthesis. The project was a journey of discovery that stimulated intellectual, emotional, and creative growth. I found openness and beauty in strangers. I found new ways to question, new questions to ask, and new means of examining answers. I found new meaning in the familiar. I found new tools of artistic exploration. I found new freedom in the systematic and new structure in the artistic. I was reminded of that for which I long, of uncertainty, of home, and of hope.

And with hope in mind, I hope that *Songs from the Willow Tree* is itself a source of inspiration, reminders, and meaning.

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