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# Rearranging: Songwriting with Multi-Genre Influence

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Rearranging: Songwriting with Multi-Genre Influence

by

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requirements for the degree of

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in

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and

Sonic Arts & Music Production

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**Abstract**

This craft essay examines the inspiration and creation of the song “Rearranging,” which was written, recorded, and produced by Ryan Elliott in his home studio over the course of four months. The project’s goal was to create a piece of music that challenged the songwriting conventions in modern popular music, while also exploring the fluidity of genre in modern music. The final piece of music is over 22 minutes in length, and explores a variety of styles within the spectrum of rock, pop, and jazz music. With lyrics attuned to the simultaneous anxiety, responsibility, and power of being a young adult in the 21st century, “Rearranging” is the culmination of the personal and societal growth he experienced over the past few years.

## **i. Introduction**

Music streaming applications such as Spotify and Apple Music have grown in popularity significantly over the past several years, quickly becoming the dominant platform through which music is consumed. Not only do these platforms provide instantaneous access to most music, but they also utilize many different features to help algorithmically recommend new music to those who use them. For the most part, these technologies are highly accurate in establishing listener patterns, and as such provide the people of today with a much easier way to discover new artists and albums. While this could be a potentially narrowing process, I would argue that playlists like Apple Music's "New Music Mix" can be highly successful in highlighting new material to listeners.

Compared to decades when the physical distribution of CDs and vinyl records or the public radio were the only way to listen to new music, we are now living in a period of unprecedented access to new music, and media as a whole. Music communities have become increasingly less niche, with listeners turning to the internet in their search for music, rather than asking an employee at the local record store. While vinyl record sales are currently experiencing a surprising comeback, the average music listener usually streams an album beforehand, and then will buy a physical copy to add to their collection. With all of this said, it comes as no surprise that many musicians, especially those from Generation Z and younger, now tend to draw inspiration from a much wider range of music than artists of the past.

It was with this in mind that I set out to write, produce, and record a song that intentionally and knowingly drew from a wide array of genres, yet maintained the cohesion expected of a singular work. Most importantly, I wanted this piece to challenge my songwriting

abilities, which had begun to feel increasingly formulaic, and so I set a goal that the runtime of the song would be at least 20 minutes. In practice, I ended up incorporating a host of genre conventions within the piece; the most predominant styles being alternative, progressive, and psychedelic rock, but also venturing into the world of jazz, indie pop, hyperpop, and bedroom pop, reaching a final runtime of over 22 minutes. While I will be discussing specific elements of the production that I feel are signifiers of their respective genres, this essay is not designed to educate the reader on musical genres or subgenres. Instead I will be describing the influences and production techniques utilized throughout the writing process, mentioning specific timestamps for reference. The styles of music I drew from for this project all originate from the western popular music canon, due to my familiarity with those types of music. I will go into detail about the experience I had while writing this piece of music, while still attempting to be relatively concise. This essay is being written under the assumption that the reader has already listened to “Rearranging,” but can also be read first to supplement the listening experience, as I will be going into each section of the piece in vivid detail. I would also like to mention that while having a base understanding of music theory and music production would certainly help in comprehension, it is not required.

## **ii. Initial Influences**

Once I developed my initial concept for this piece, I started to compile a list of my favorite songs with extended runtimes in order to study how they were successful despite their extended lengths. The first reference that came to mind was the 1977 release from Canadian progressive rock band Rush, “2112.” Taking up the entire first side of its album of the same name, “2112” is an over 20 minute ride of soaring vocals, virtuosic guitar solos, and some of the

best drumming in rock music. To top it all off, the song featured lyrics detailing a far-future uprising against a tyrannical galactic council desperate to ban music and keep the population oppressed. The song seems to take inspiration from classical music, with numerous sections appearing as a suite, something that was reflected in the original extended title of the song.

This was a piece of music I was deeply familiar with, and I have always been impressed with how cohesive it feels despite reaching so many different places throughout its runtime. A few things stood out to me as reasons “2112” is successful, starting with the consistent instrumental palette. While there are a few instrument changes throughout the song, it always returns to the same mix of voice, electric guitar, drums, and bass. This was something I knew I had to incorporate in some capacity to my own piece, especially since I would be recording most of the instrumentation myself. Another element of success is the lyrical throughline, which tells a story from start to finish. While I didn’t want to write a story with characters, and I wanted to keep the lyrics grounded in reality, I knew I had to establish a concept and not stray too far from it. The one problem I saw with “2112” that I wanted to avoid in my writing was the lack of a chorus. Although Rush incorporates certain motifs into their song, there are no repeated sections or lyrics, and since I set out to write what was essentially a pop song, I knew I had to create a chorus that could be repeated throughout the song and used in a variety of contexts.

One song that features a nontraditional structure while still including a regular chorus is the song “Good Vibrations” by the Beach Boys, from their 1967 album *Smiley Smile*. While this song is shorter than the 20 minute goal I had set for myself, it is a great example of how to use transitions to stitch together different sections of music that might otherwise come across as jarring. This was another obstacle I knew I would face in creating a song of this length and diversity, and I began to take mental notes when listening to other songs that took a more

suitelike approach to their compositions. A few other pieces of music I would also like to list as initial pieces of inspiration for the structure of my piece are “Beach Life-In-Death” by Car Seat Headrest, “Epitaph” by King Crimson, and “Microphones in 2020” by The Microphones. These were all pieces of music I had been keeping in mind when starting my work on this project, but many more influences crept into this song as it developed. I tend to have a flexible approach to songwriting, so this was something I anticipated. Rarely does a piece of music fully capture the initial idea I was holding onto once it is completed, and that was certainly the case here. As such, I will be discussing more specific moments of inspiration and incorporations of genre, in the fourth section focused on structure. While my initial places of influence all stemmed from the world of rock music, I think sections of “Rearranging” do travel beyond that realm, while staying grounded within their commonalities.

### **iii. Equipment**

I recorded and produced almost everything you hear in “Rearranging” in my home studio, which was located in Portland, Oregon at the time. I used the Digital Audio Workstation (DAW) software Logic Pro X because of my familiarity with the program, love for its features and user interface, and its optimization for MacOS. Since this would end up becoming quite a large project file by the time I finished the song, it became increasingly valuable to have access to hardware and software that worked efficiently. My workflow is quite fast using Logic, having now produced four albums utilizing it under my moniker Payette. Part of my speed is due to the host of presets the software includes for mixing vocals, and the underrated selection of guitar and bass amp emulators you can use to enhance the sound of directly recorded instruments. Logic also features high quality stock plugins, which not only includes an excellent selection of effects

like reverbs, delays, and distortion, but also virtual MIDI (Music Instrument Digital Interface) instruments, such as pianos, synthesizers, percussion, and so on, which I used extensively throughout the piece in conjunction with my physical instruments. A trained ear might be able to tell the difference between a digital instrument and an analog instrument, but they are essentially indistinguishable to the average music listener.

While I do have access to a real acoustic drum kit, at the time of making this piece I unfortunately didn't have the proper hardware to get a high quality recording of them, so to compensate for this I used the built-in MIDI drum sequencer tools in Logic to create the drums for the song. Being able to edit and tweak all the parts of my virtual drums kit to sound how I wanted them to sound is always helpful, and it makes tweaking things like the placement of specific drum hits within the music much more feasible. Since I originally started out as a drummer before I began to study music production, I have also learned ways to make programmed drums sound more lifelike by minimizing the quantization used and editing the velocity of drum hits to mimic how a drummer would actually fluctuate both rhythmically and in volume. Once I established the drum sounds I wanted in this piece, I made sure to keep the same virtual kit throughout the entire song to help sustain the illusion that it was a recording of an acoustic kit, and not something created in a computer.

I used a Focusrite Scarlett 2i2 interface in order to record the rest of my physical equipment, which included acoustic guitars, a Squire stratocaster electric guitar, a Fender jazz bass, a Korg Minilogue polyphonic synthesizer, and a Sterling Audio ST151 condenser microphone. I used the Sterling mic for both the recording of acoustic guitar on this piece, as well as my own vocals. I have come to appreciate the tone of this microphone, especially with my voice, as it allows me to capture the innate warmth I feel is present in the timbre of my



singing. One last piece of gear worth mentioning is my MIDI Keyboard made by Arturia, which allowed me to control the virtual instruments with Logic that I used.

#### **iv. Structure**

##### **00:00 - First Verse: “Isn’t it funny how slowly things go wrong?”**

“Rearranging” begins with two tracks of acoustic guitar respectively panned left and right, and vocals in the center of the mix as the first verse begins right away. The key is firmly set in B major at a relatively slow tempo. I wanted to start small at the beginning of this piece, gradually building tension while also letting the lyrics have space to resonate. During the verse, I keep things interesting by automating the reverb and delay during intense moments to create a roomy, swelling effect around my vocals. By the time the form repeats for a second time I have introduced a deep synth bass to add some weight to the simplistic acoustic guitar pattern, as well as a spacey layer of synthesizer to add a bit of high frequency sparkle. This section was instrumentally inspired the most by “Microphones in 2020,” as that song utilizes the acoustic guitar as a texture in a way that is both simple and hypnotizing. Vocally, I am singing quite high for my head voice, belting the lyrics almost like a plea for help. While this could be attributed to punk or emo acts like Jeff Rosenstock or Turnstile, I didn’t record those vocals with any one style particularly in mind.

##### **02:27 - First Chorus**

Despite my overall goal of this piece being to make the transitions between sections as smooth as possible, for the first chorus I felt I had to do a sudden and exciting entrance in order to capitalize on the slow build of the first verse, especially after having to wait over two minutes to get here. If this song had a typical 3-5 minute runtime that would be quite a long time to wait for the chorus to arrive, but since I went into the writing process of this piece knowing the song

would be at least 20 minutes, I knew I had time to be patient. This chorus is the first time we hear electric guitar, bass guitar, and drums, with the three instruments layering with the acoustic guitars to create a steady, booming background. The electric guitar has a bit of distortion and slapback delay typically found in garage rock, and locks in with the snare drum to play a simple eighth note rhythm. The bass guitar is being run through a fuzz pedal, giving it a thick, warm tone that rumbles underneath the other instruments. The drums are especially heavy here, as I ran a duplicate of the kick and snare track through a guitar amp to give them some extra punch here. The vocals intentionally take up a lot of space in the mix, with three separate takes of the chorus being panned left, right, and center, with a bit of distortion for warmth and lots of compression to flatten their dynamic range. The chorus section is made up of only two chords, an alternation between the I and IV chords in B major. This is a common progression throughout this piece, leading to a hypnotic simplicity in harmony that I often find myself coming back to when I'm writing a chorus.

#### **02:54 - Second Verse: "Living today is like a battle with a big god"**

This verse follows the same harmonic and melodic structure as the first, but with the drums and bass from the chorus carrying over. The tone is similarly melancholy, but with the addition of the rest of the rhythm section helps to drive the song forward, even with such a simple accompaniment. Influences here include artists like Alex G and The Flaming Lips. When the structure repeats this time around a few bars are removed, which also does a lot to speed up the pacing. There are light flourishes with synthesizer all throughout this section as well, which helps to keep the ear interested. There are also some unique techniques happening in the vocal mixing, with multiple takes often being layered and having various effects on them. This is also the first section of the piece to feature vocal harmonies, which becomes an important part of the

vocal performance later. This section ends on a break, leaving the vocals to sing one final line before arriving in the next chorus.

### **04:39 - Second Chorus**

This chorus is almost identical to the previous one, with three exceptions. The first is that this chorus is twice as long, serving to further establish that this is a section to pay attention to. The second is a light electric piano layer that plays with the snare and guitar, which is hard to hear in the mix but makes a difference in tone. The third is that there is now a call and response line, with another set of vocals repeating lines sung by the lead. I believe it's absolutely essential to diversify elements in repeating sections of music so it doesn't feel like it was copied and pasted from a previous spot. This is also why I sing and play a new take of every instrument on each chorus, to keep a healthy amount of difference between them.

### **05:32 - 7/8 Bridge: "So don't sit idly by"**

This is the first section in "Rearranging" to feature another time signature beyond 4/4, switching to a bouncy 7/8 here. Specifically, it is an alternation between three bars of 7/8 and one of 4/4. The vocal line is accompanied by a unison line from both the acoustic guitars in each ear, as well as a funky electric guitar part with a filter pedal, giving it that fun "womp womp" sound. If you are still feeling the pulse of the music in quarter notes at this point, it might feel like the beat is skipping or coming in too early. The change to 7/8 helps get rid of some empty space between vocal lines, while introducing some rhythmic variation. This section was heavily inspired by psychedelic rock and jam bands like Australia's King Gizzard and the Lizard Wizard.

### **05:56 - Woodwind Interlude: "We're all so tired of fighting"**

This section brings several layers of clarinet, saxophone, and flute into the fray, which become recurring members of the instrumentation throughout the song. This section is composed

in alternating sets of two bars, with the lead clarinet stating an idea, then two bars of heavy guitar and drum hits, and is back in a straight 4/4 time signature. The mantra of “We’re all so tired of fighting” is also continued from the bridge, but is now a group of voices all singing together in unison. Once this cycle of alternating has been repeated twice, the texture becomes consistent, with there no longer being moments of harsh guitar. This builds for a moment, then gradually breaks apart and drifts into soft tones, before a moment of quiet.

### **07:00 - Third Chorus**

This chorus is subtly queued by some light taps on the cymbal, and the keen will notice that the tempo has now slightly sped up. Without changing much, this difference brings a significant amount of energy with it, revitalizing a section that the listener has heard twice before. The vocal call and response from the prior chorus has now been replaced with a response from a quirky synthesizer, punctuating the space in between lines. To transition into the next section, the vocals and guitars start to skip and glitch at the end of the phrase, throwing off the sense of time pulse as we move into new territory, where we land with a much slower tempo and heavier feeling.

### **07:50 - Heavy Bridge**

After spending so much time planted firmly in the realm of rock music, I thought it would be fitting to top it off with a climactic breakdown, inspired by modern shoegaze acts like Parannoul and Ringo Deathstarr. This is the loudest section of the song, and serves as a peak before a shift in the emotional tone of the piece. Shoegaze music is characterized by thick layers of guitar, often being described as a wall of sound. These are usually complemented by bright, effect-soaked vocals, creating a simultaneous blend of warped and distorted textures. I incorporated both of these elements here, feeling comfortable in my decision to play it close to

the source material since I am using this style of music as a moment in “Rearranging,” rather than a consistent stylistic inclusion. One of my favorite elements in this portion of the song besides the timbre of the layered guitars is the drum fills, which I spent a fair amount of time assembling in the pursuit of accuracy. I think they add a lot of weight and movement here. The transition from this section into the next is like the splashdown of a rocket into the ocean, in which the IV chord of E in B major is used as a pivot chord, modulating down a whole step into the key of A major, where it functions as the dominant V chord.

### **08:51 - Mantra Interlude “Now the sun is rising”**

Offering a sudden reduction in energy from the shoegaze section, this next movement features washed out layers of vocals repeating the mantra, “Now the sun is rising.” The textures become much more open, with soft, simple drums and bass allowing the song to breathe for a moment, inspired in part by dream pop acts like Beach House. There is a bubbly synthesizer arpeggio played on the Korg Minilogue to help keep rhythmic progression, playing a 16th note pattern in contrast to the half-time feel of the rest of the instrumentation. The electric guitar continues, only now it is slightly smaller in stature and wetted with reverb. A light synth bell tone adds the final melodic touch. My goal in creating this interlude was to act as a palate cleanser before the first major genre shift, preparing the listener for something new.

### **09:49 - Saxophone Solo / Woodwind Choir**

Arguably my favorite section in “Rearranging,” this section marks the beginning of the song’s second half, which features a much brighter and upbeat tone, both lyrically and instrumentally. It begins with a pickup line on the bass, which has acquired a new tone for the time being. While still a bit distorted, the bass guitar is now processed with a chorus pedal as well as a slow phaser, giving it a smooth, wide sound, with subtle warping. The time signature

has changed once again, now entering a bouncy 5/8, felt in groups of three and two, a way of feeling five made famous by Dave Brubeck's legendary "Take Five." Jazz was perhaps the biggest influence here overall, but I was also trying to incorporate elements of art-pop groups like Stereolab with my instrument choice. There is another Minilogue synthesizer part here, outlining the chords and helping to add another layer of rhythmic complexity that divides the bar of five into two phrases of equal length. The real star of the show here is, of course, the tenor saxophone solo played by composer and multiinstrumentalist Liam R. Marchant. Starting with low intensity, his saxophone initially leaves space for the listener to become accustomed to the new time signature and change of tone, before eventually playing more dynamic phrases as the two chord loop is established. Halfway through this section, multiple tracks of alto and tenor saxophone, clarinet, and flute join the arrangement, also played and composed by Marchant. They dance around in a syncopated group, while the drums play a more consistent pattern to contrast their movement. I recommend listening to this section with headphones to hear the way the woodwinds play around each other.

### **11:00 - Fourth Chorus**

This is the first chorus in "Rearranging" to feature a totally new instrumentation. The lyrics and chord progression are the same as before, but many things have changed. The Minilogue part from the previous section continues here, but now the pattern has adjusted to our return to 4/4. We've gone back to the same fuzzy bass guitar tone as before, although it is not playing the same line as on the previous choruses. The drums are playing a steady beat with some accents on the hi-hats, adding to the slow but firm groove. There still is an element of call and response, but this is now between the vocals and the saxophone. Partway through we get an electric guitar on the upbeats, which in conjunction with the bass guitar gives a slight nod

towards reggae. Generally, this chorus has been inspired by neo-soul and neo-funk, with a slightly atypical combination of synthesizers, distorted guitars, fuzzy bass, and saxophone.

### **11:52 - Third Verse: “If you could fall asleep at night”**

While this verse does act as a temporary refrain, I do choose to think of it as a verse. The harmony is based on a classic jazz ii-V-I progression, with a group of deep backing vocals humming along in the background. While they can sound a bit goofy on their own, I think they add a really interesting counterpoint to the lead vocals, which are much higher in register. Funnily enough, when I was recording those backing vocals I was envisioning something like the seven dwarves singing along, or maybe a pirate sea shanty. I think it gives this section a lightheartedness that contrasts some of the lyrics, while also reinforcing the change in emotional weight towards feelings of compassion and community. Once the lyrics repeat we get more saxophone and clarinets joining in with the background vocals, creating a steady collage for the vocals to float on top of with a much looser rhythm.

### **12:44 - Fourth Verse / Triplet Interlude: “And I know things are hard”**

This fourth verse starts on a pickup out of the third, where we have slipped out of the straight eighth note feel into an eighth note triplet groove. This allows the song to stay at the same tempo overall, but feel slower and heavier at the same time. This also leads to some interesting options with syncopation, which I enjoyed working with. At this point the bass guitar is replaced with a synth bass, which gives it a deep, clean sound. The saxophone is the true star once again, playing a multi-part harmony with the vocals. There is a synthesizer playing a quarter note pulse in the background, with a bitcrusher active that creates that ultra bright digital distortion that adds more action in the high frequencies, a necessity since this portion of the song would otherwise be mostly resting in the mid and low frequency area.

This section utilizes a six bar structure, with the first two bars featuring synchronized stabs, halting the groove and letting the vocals stand out. The next four bars then bring the rest of the band in, playing a consistent 6/8 feel. The saxophones and clarinets begin to hold their notes, bringing in some tasteful dissonance that adds a lot of spice to the harmony. This repeats twice, and then we bring the energy down for a moment, entering a short interlude with a sine-based synth lead, which could be heard similarly to a whistle. The bitcrushed keys in the back continue playing their slow pace, but mostly rest on the same chord with changing extensions. The synth bass plays a steady triplet rhythm here, doing more to outline the harmony. To keep the overall rhythm more interesting, right before the vocals cut out I increased the feedback on the tape delay it's being sent through, causing it to continually ring out. I automated the rate of the delay to cause it to shift in rhythm, which contrasts well against the steadiness of the other instruments. The second ends with a harmonic resolution, which also coincides with a rhythmic shift back to straight eighth notes. A quick roll on the snare drum leads us into the next section.

### **13:51 - Fifth Chorus**

This chorus begins with an additional distorted synth layer on top of the synth bass, building anticipation for the beginning of a new section. We get a snare hit, and are immediately launched into a new chorus with a double time groove. It's the same two chord progression played on the previous choruses, with a purely electronic backing instrumental. The sharp buzz of the bass was inspired by hyperpop acts like SOPHIE, 100 Gecs, and Charli XCX, while the busy synth lead draws from synth-pop groups like Of Montreal or MGMT. This first chorus is only eight bars long, the length of the first chorus two minutes in. I did this to keep the chorus from becoming too stale, even with another drastic change in instrumentation.

### **14:23 - Fifth Verse "I will not run away from this"**



This verse starts with a simple drumbeat, keeping time with a kick and claps. The lead synth from the previous section continues, but with a new pattern that responds to the vocals. The synth bass plays a consistent part with occasional fills, and the distorted layer being added during key moments in the verse for emphasis. When the rest of the drums enter, the hi-hat initially plays a quick, splashy part that is replaced for a more driving beat partway through. While the hi-hat becomes busier, I work in a synth pad to add some smoother textures to what is otherwise a fairly dominant group of instruments. This point in the song is meant to start feeling truly optimistic, which I will discuss in the passage on lyrics.

### **15:16 - Sixth Chorus / Guitar Solo**

The chorus reaches perhaps the highest intensity level of all, starting with a more stripped back sound on the first time through, mostly just being backed with drums and bass. There is the addition of a bright synth bell to add some brightness, which works well in contrast to the speed of the rhythm section. The second time through the chorus the synth lead returns, joined by some shouted background vocals that add a lot of intensity. Even though there is no guitar present at this point, I wanted to treat this synth pop instrumental like it was a rock song, trying to add as much grit to my singing as possible. That mindset is what gave me the idea to bring the electric guitar back onto this section, opting for a fuzzy, phased guitar tone that wouldn't be out of place in a psychedelic rock song from the 60s. Played by Artemis Wilson, her solo follows the formula of a classic rock solo, starting slow before working its way towards faster and flashier playing. The intensity builds, getting slightly glitchier until we get an abrupt slowdown, ending the solo and queuing the next section.

### **17:01 - Trap Interlude**

After being exposed to a mashup of electronic and rock music, we are now thrust firmly back into the world of electronic music production here as the booming 808 drums, rattling snares and sputtering hi-hats of trap music are introduced. When I started producing in 2016, I was focusing mostly on producing this kind of music, as seems to be the case for many emerging producers of the home studio era we find ourselves in. Once again we enter a halftime feel, with a distorted synth bass with a slow attack creating a feeling of being sucked into the next snare hit. I opted to layer the same acoustic drum kit I had been using with classic drum machine style sounds in order to stay familiar while doing something new at the same time. After a few bars we get a passage of my vocals that I pitched and chopped up, which was actually inspired by some of the work that Daft Punk does with their vocals, albeit not vocoded.

### **17:28 - Seventh Chorus**

Once this vocal chop ends, we experience a fake-out on the downbeat, and instead a swishing effect leads the way for vocals to enter from Trynadee Hodge. This is the first time another vocalist has had the lead vocal on the entire song, and I wanted her introduction to feel like a breath of fresh air in the song. This also helps the chorus to feel fresh once again, and since the listener is now deeply familiar with its progression Hodge is free to explore more with the melody. Her vocal timbre is soft, high, and light, in contrast to mine, which can feel quite strong, low, and full. In my prior work with her, I've found that pairing her gentle vocals with both ethereal and harsher sounds can create an excellent contrast. For example, when her vocals enter we get extra layers of electric guitar, some very distorted, but there is also a clean, chorused guitar in the background. This blend of guitar, 808s, and synthesizers help continue to blur the lines between rock music and trap, following in the footsteps of modern alt-rap trailblazers like Tyler, the Creator and BROCKHAMPTON. This chorus ends with a swell of reverb from the

vocals, and along with a synthesizer they slowly slid up in pitch, eventually landing us in the new key of F# major. This is a decidedly unconventional way to do a key change, at least as far as standard modulations go, but I feel as though the destabilization it causes prepares the listener to land somewhere else.

### **18:24 - Eighth Chorus**

This chorus finally reintroduces us to the acoustic and bass guitars, helping to steer the listener back towards the instrumentation found at the beginning of the piece. While I don't do much to sing this chorus differently, I am now joined by Trynadee Hodge singing reverb and tremolo-soaked backing vocals and the bass guitar following along like a lower harmony. The acoustic guitar strums along softly in the background, which acts as a semi-percussive force in an otherwise drumless section of the song. Some soft synth sounds help increase the sense of space, and complete the formula for this section. The combination of fairly dry sounds with some large, bright reverbs was also inspired by The Flaming Lips, especially on their 2020 release *American Head*. At one point I considered this to possibly be the end of the piece, but I finally decided "Rearranging" would need a grand finale rather than a simple resolution.

### **19:26 - Vocal Round**

To begin working my way towards the climax, I thought it would be interesting to just sit on one chord and begin speeding up. I decided on what tempo and groove I wanted for the end of the song, and then programmed a gradual ramp in tempo to that point. I recorded the acoustic guitar first, simply strumming an F# chord and syncing up to the hastening metronome. From there I did the same thing with bass, recording a harmony part with it at the same time. After that, I focused on vocals. I recorded the repetition of the lead, and then gradually began to add more and more harmonies placed at different times within the phrase, with Trynadee's vocals

being the cherry on top. I made sure to pan the vocals all differently to increase the sense of space. The combination of our vocals with the droning F# major harmony leads to a hypnotic and shifting sound, finally resolving on a multi-part harmony once we've reached the final tempo. That harmony then gets chopped into a four-count in our new tempo, preparing the listener for the final groove.

### **20:16 - Synth Solo / Sixth Verse "Isn't it funny how we tell ourselves nothing can change?"**

From there, we jump straight into a synth solo, which features a thick, 8-bit inspired sound with some thick distortion. The rhythm section is now playing a swung beat, inspired by funk and some hip-hop music, as well as the modern psych-pop of Tame Impala. The bass is back to the original tone, with the addition of a phaser to add some extra movement. There are also some synth keys playing chords, which is the simple two-bar loop that has become ingrained within the structure of "Rearranging" at this point. A higher line in the bass guitar joins the synth lead as it wraps up its solo, rapidly detuning before cutting out to just the bass, drums, and vocals. The vocals make a melodic and lyrical callback to the first verse in the song, bringing the piece full circle. This verse is short, and mainly serves to restate the true theme of the song. The other instruments then cut out, and an electric guitar harmony in each ear slides in to bring the listener into the final chorus.

### **21:22 - Final Chorus / Ending**

This chorus is short and to the point, finally returning fully to the guitar, bass, and drum-driven sound of the song's beginning. This section is high energy, with syncopated bass and drum grooves providing a fierce but groovy layer to sing on. After some aggressive vocals and a few fills with drum and bass we are cooled down with an arpeggiator of the F# major7 chord on guitar. The vocals begin to sing the chorus, but stop short of the second line. Instead,

the word “change” is repeated by a large stack of harmonies, before resolving on the home chord once again. This resolution is met with a reverb automation, causing the vocals to swell to a massive size. The woodwinds also make one final appearance here, with some soft trills adding a final touch of warmth to this harmonic wall. This final chord fades away into a bright synth arpeggio which greets listeners' ears with a final bit of intrigue before “Rearranging” concludes.

**v. Lyrics** (*Full Transcription on Page 28*)

When I began the process of creating “Rearranging,” I had about seven minutes of the instrumental done before I started working on lyrics. I was seeing many people my age on the internet dealing with feelings of hopelessness in the current state of the world, especially regarding the state of climate change and the economy. These were feelings I had been harboring since my 2022 album *Crisis As Usual*, which dealt with similar lyrical themes. As fears for the future slowly began to eat away at me, I decided that this project would be another way for me to cope with these thoughts and express them in a healthy way. I came up with the idea to divide my thesis into two rough halves, the first couched within the anxiety and anger many including myself were bearing, and the second half being much more optimistic. I thought this piece could essentially follow the journey required to make such an intense mindset switch from bleak to hopeful, maybe even convincing myself in the process. While I won't discuss every lyric here, I will give my thoughts and interpretations on what I believe to be key moments.

I wrote the first and second verse over what music I had in progress, and found the melody and phrasing that spoke to me. The first line “Isn't it funny how slowly things go wrong?” is trying to encapsulate the feeling of looking around and wondering how things got so bad, not noticing the deterioration until it seems too late. “Stuck in revolving doors that never

stop spinning, just close enough to see how far we are from getting in” is me venting about the victories for self-expression and mental health that we have won, while simultaneously seeming to devolve culturally in other ways. This first verse speaks from the perspective of “we,” referring to the younger generations. This is both to gear the song towards a collective mentality, while also taking the pressure off of getting too personal too quickly. The use of “you” in “You need that money so you’re healthy and strong, but don’t believe in helping others along” is targeted towards the members of the one percent, as the wealth gap continues to grow more disparate every year. This also goes for the second verse, in which I state “Living today is like a battle with a big god. Someone is watching while you try to get a third job.” This is my attempt to capture the ceaseless frustration of working multiple jobs and not making rent, while the ultra-rich hoard excessive wealth.

In this second verse I began to get more personal, utilizing a change in vocal mixing that presents my voice as much more raw and isolated. “So I’ll play two chords, and sing to stop from dying. Don’t hear from me in a month, oh that’s just Ryan.” This is the only time I have used my real name in a song, and this felt like the proper time to do so, directly addressing my use of music as a coping mechanism. After dipping back into negativity, I end the second verse with the line “But just because it’s less bright doesn’t mean dark is king.” This is the first true shift towards optimism I wrote for this song, and I knew I was headed somewhere. I just had to figure out what my chorus was.

Despite the fact that it’s only two lines, the chorus in “Rearranging” took me a while to figure out. I ended up going with “Seems like it might be time for change. Every part of our lives will be rearranged.” To me, these were lyrics that could be reinterpreted in a variety of situations, beginning with the anxiety that the song’s intro is built around. Everything needs to be

rearranged, but that doesn't mean we have the time, skills, or energy to be able to make that happen. As the verses become more optimistic, the chorus is able to become more uplifting. Context matters a lot when interpreting lyrics, and I felt that the simplicity of the lines would allow them to more easily shift in tone towards what the song was doing at any point.

The lyrics in the 7/8 section after the second chorus invite the listener to not cave to the exhaustion of life, and the internal doubt that can cause paralysis. This is why the mantra of "We're all so tired of fighting" becomes a large group vocal once the woodwinds enter, starting to give power to the idea of community. One person alone can't change anything, but a whole generation is another beast entirely. After the third chorus we enter the heavy bridge section, which has vocals without lyrics. I wanted this section to feel cathartic to the listener, like screaming into the wilderness to release pent-up rage and frustrations that words simply can't convey. The softness of my vocals in the following interlude section repeating "Now the sun is rising" are meant to be a breath of fresh air after the aggression of my belting, and signify the dawn of something new and beautiful.

After our first chorus with the jazzier instrumental, we enter our refrain imagining a world without fear of guns, blight, and everything in between. Gun violence is one of the top concerns for many people living in the United States currently, with mass shootings essentially being reported everyday. The line about blight is a reference to the recent pandemic, which has irreparably changed the way many people view the world. At first I state that we might get to a place without these things, but through the repetition of these lines I stand firm and say we *will* get there. This is something that won't be easy, which is what I acknowledge in the next verse with the triplet groove. The point I establish here is that in spite of the difficulties, humanity has

survived this long, and can continue to persevere through the challenges as long as we “Turn the wheel” of change.

Now we’ve entered the double-time synthpop section, which brings a complete acceptance of the difficulties of making change, gearing up to face them head-on. The chorus lyrics stay the same, but the change in their meaning is clear now. Change is long overdue, and we will rearrange our lives in order to make it happen. I sing the verse in this section utilizing both “I” and “we,” with the intention of listeners hearing this and filling in the role themselves. This verse is strongly in favor of future generations, acknowledging that with the right amount of work they can be saved, along with Earth. I state “Everywhere that I look I can see people that are smarter than me. So many bright young minds.” While there is a lot to be scared about in the world, I am also regularly astounded by the brilliant research many emerging scientists and sociologists are coming up with to help make the world a better place, and it’s hard not to be inspired by them. While music may not be the most effective tool at changing the world, I wanted to use my ambition for this project as a way of joining them in the goal of empowering the world.

After a few more uses of the chorus, sung by both Trynadee Hodge and I, the listener is met with a short, final verse before its last repetition. The verse reads: “Isn’t it funny how we tell ourselves nothing can change? But with a little bit of effort, everything will rearrange. If you look down, you’ll notice that you’re breathing. Take a minute, use your lungs, and just breathe in.” These last few lines not only interpolate the chorus into a verse structure, but also melodically and lyrically call back to the song’s first verse. This is meant to be a final reminder not to let yourself get caught up in feelings of hopelessness, and to look for the good in being alive. Take a deep breath, and focus on what you are able to accomplish with the time that you



have. “Rearranging” as a whole is meant to say “The world is frightening right now, and you are not alone in being afraid. Look to those around you for comfort, and remember that together you are strong.”

## **vi. Collaboration**

Since the power of community is a major theme in this piece, I wanted to try and work with as many collaborators as I could within my timeline. Even though I produced almost all of “Rearranging” myself, there were several components I would need assistance with. The first person I began to work with was Artemis Wilson, who recorded the guitar solo at 16:09. I knew I wanted a fuzzy, phaser-soaked shredding guitar solo here, and that I was not the right person for the job. While I can play rhythm guitar and bass well enough, I don’t have the years of practice to play anything more than a simple solo. I reached out to her and she agreed to work with me, and after a few weeks and many takes later we landed on the finished solo you hear in the song.

While the solo is mostly one take, there is a brief section at 16:50 that I wanted to point out because of its unique sound. During one runthrough, we recorded a messy bit of distortion that sounded interesting to both of us, and I decided to splice it in with the rest of the solo, momentarily cutting out the rest of the instruments to make it stand out. While it might’ve been a mistake when we recorded it, adding intention to an error makes it deliberate.

Another collaborator on this project was Oliver Schulenburg, who played the lead clarinet part during the woodwind interlude section. This was a part that I had originally played on a MIDI synth lead, with the intention of having it overdubbed with clarinet later. I transcribed what I had written for him, and it only took him three takes to completely nail it. In that same section, I had my partner Hunter Hagen to join me in the group vocal of “We’re all so tired of fighting,”

bringing legitimacy to a group of vocals that would have otherwise been ten tracks of me singing that line in different inflections to give the illusion of multiple people singing at once.

The two collaborators I utilized the most in creating this project were vocalist Trynadee Hodge and multi-instrumentalist and composer Liam Marchant. Trynadee and I used to make bedroom pop music together in the duo little mood, and so I knew her voice would be the perfect complement to mine. She was living in Boise, Idaho at the time of writing this song, so I sent her a list of what I needed from her, and she sent me the stems of her vocals for me to use. I chopped up what she gave me and moved it where I thought it would fit best, and got to work mixing her recording so it made sense with mine. I am so grateful to have her voice on this project, and I think she brings a lot of life to “Rearranging.”

Liam Marchant, however, was the most influential person in shaping the outcome of this piece. When I contacted him initially, it was only to record a saxophone solo over the 5/8 section at 09:54, which was something I had been hearing in my head while composing that section. When Liam sent me his stems, he also included all of the other woodwind parts you hear in that section, which was completely his idea. When I heard how much life his arrangement brought to that section, I knew I couldn’t utilize his abilities only on one part of “Rearranging.” I reached out to him again with a list of my ideas, and he got to work. While I did give him vague suggestions on what I wanted him to play, he did all the arranging himself, adding woodwinds to the section Oliver Schulenburg had been playing on, as well as the chorus and verses following the 5/8 section. Liam’s saxophone, flute, and clarinet work add so much to this piece, and I feel as though they take it to a much higher level than it could have been without his contributions. While I could have completed “Rearranging” completely alone, it would not have been as diverse or impactful without reaching out to a few friends.

## **vii. Revisions**

Since I have released a decent body of work before my work on this project, I have learned to trust my artistic instincts and not doubt my creative decision as much as I would have four or five years ago. That being said, there was a previous version of “Rearranging” that was about four minutes that I scrapped completely, because I felt it wasn’t the right direction for this project. It was too electronic, and the section I meant to be the song’s intro started at too high of an energy level for a piece that was supposed to be at least 20 minutes. I needed a fresh start, and so I picked up my acoustic guitar and played for a few minutes until I found an idea I wanted to pursue. There was one other section I scrapped that was going to be a 90s hip-hop inspired section with a boom bap style of drums, but it clashed too much with the section before it. I ended up taking the idea of a swung, hip-hop inspired beat and worked it into the psych-rock sound of the final verse and chorus.

Apart from that, the biggest part of the revision process was mixing, which involved me bouncing dozens of different versions to myself while I worked, listening to the song on as many different sets of speakers and headphones as possible. I would listen to the progress I’d made on my way to campus, whether in my car or taking public transportation, and I would make a list of tweaks in my phone. As soon as I got home I would go to my studio and fire up Logic to make these tiny changes, which occasionally were only noticeable to me. This was my process for the months I spent working on “Rearranging,” making small edits to the sections I had while trying ideas for transitions and where to take the piece next. I sent myself different mixes dozens of times, but it was all worth it to achieve the most professional sound that I could. There were times I had to step back and take a break from listening to the song for a few days to avoid burnout, but when I returned I always found my motivation again.

To help remember ideas, I would record voice memos of myself in my car or at work singing ideas into my phone for later, which ended up being an incredibly useful tool. I distinctly remember sitting in my car outside of the gym humming the background vocals for the third verse, which is a humorous clip for me to listen back on. While I was writing the song I also made sure to play my demos for as many friends as I could, trying to get feedback on the different sections if I could. Even if the friends I'm sharing with know nothing about music they can still give helpful feedback, and I can usually gain something from their critiques.

My thesis advisor Dr. Caroline Louise Miller was also very helpful during the revision process, mainly giving me suggestions on how to touch up my mixes and add bits of ear candy to make certain sections more interesting. For example, they recommended certain areas to add additional drum fills or vocal harmonies, filling up space in the piece that would otherwise be somewhat blank. Dr. Miller also helped boost my confidence when it came to the theme of my project and my capabilities, which helped me follow through on what has become the most ambitious musical project I have ever created.

### **viii. Conclusion**

“Rearranging” was a song written with two goals in mind. I wanted to incorporate the fluidity of genre with contemporary popular music, and I wanted the song to be at least 20 minutes in length while still featuring a consistent and memorable chorus. The final runtime is 22 minutes and 24 seconds, and I have a chorus which appears nine times in total in several different forms. I included stylistic elements of psych-rock, prog-rock, alt-rock, art-rock, jazz, neo-soul, neo-funk, bedroom pop, hyperpop, and synthpop. While there are many other genres of

music that I didn't pursue in this project, I feel comfortable in calling my exploration of merging genres a success.

I'm actually quite proud with the way that "Rearranging" has turned out. I think it serves as a culmination of all my growth as a songwriter, musician, and producer, as well as my overall outlook on life. This is the most time I have spent working on a singular piece of music, and I think it shows. It allowed me to collaborate with talented people that I will certainly be working with again, and I am pleased it didn't end up being another totally solo effort. Writing this song helped me process the frustration I was feeling with the world, and telling myself to stay positive in my lyrics did actually help me feel more optimistic in my day-to-day life. I ended up struggling with some issues in my personal and family life while working on this song, and it was both my personal anthem for my life's upheaval, and something to focus my efforts on in the long term. Once I release this song, I hope that it can offer similar catharsis to those who listen.

**ix. Full Lyric Transcription**

(First Verse)

Isn't it funny how slowly things go wrong?  
We live our whole lives humming to the same song  
In revolving doors that never stop spinning,  
Just close enough to see how far we are from getting in  
So take a minute to look 'round  
And face what's next  
We aren't going anywhere  
So don't forget

You need that money so you're healthy and strong  
But don't believe in helping others along  
In a feedback loop of spending and earning  
When giving anything would help those hurting  
So take a minute to think it through  
How much time is left?  
Would you help those after you  
Or lose that cash at death?

(Chorus)

Seems like it might be time for change  
Every part of our lives will be rearranged

(Second Verse)

Living today is a like a battle with a big god  
Someone is watching while you try to get a third job  
One that pays enough to give you what you're worth  
Praying it doesn't cost your energy reserve  
Well, would you remind me why I put in the effort?  
Managing everything  
Is gonna make my head burst

So I'll play two chords and sing to stop from dying  
Don't hear from me in a month, "Oh that's just Ryan"  
Will the moment come when everything collapses?  
Buildings crumble down upon the ailing masses  
That's just what it feels like when I can't do anything  
But just because it's less bright doesn't mean dark is king

(Chorus)

Seems like it might be time for change  
Every part of our lives will be rearranged  
Seems like it might be time for change  
Every part of our lives will be rearranged

(Bridge)

So don't sit idly by

Or spend your day inside

Even though it's no lie

We're all so tired of fighting

And if we realized

Where we get all this spite

I think you'll probably find

We're all so tired of fighting ourselves

We're all so tired of fighting

We're all so tired of fighting

We're all so tired of fighting

We're all so tired of fighting

(Chorus)

Seems like it might be time for change

Every part of our lives will be rearranged

Seems like it might be time for change

Every part of our lives will be rearranged

(Refrain)

Now the sun is rising *(Repeated)*



(Chorus)

Seems like it might be time for change

Every part of our lives will be rearranged, rearranged

Seems like it might be time for change

Every part of our lives is rearranged

(Third Verse)

If you could fall asleep at night

No fear of the world or guns or blight

Imagine how rested you would feel

Awake in a morning that appeals

Oh god one day we might be

Living that reality

Living that reality, where

Where you fall asleep at night

No fear of the world or guns or blight

Imagine how rested you would feel

Awake in a morning that appeals

Oh man, one day we will be

Living that reality

Living that reality

(Fourth Verse)

And I know things are hard  
Lord knows we've got all our scars  
But we're here, we're alive, we can fight  
Since we've made it this far  
Made it this far  
We could break it apart  
As long as we help it start  
Turn the wheel, spin the gears, listen here  
Haven't we come so far?  
We've made it this far

(Chorus)

Seems like it might be time for change  
Every part of our lives will be rearranged, yeah

(Fifth Verse)

I will not run away from this  
No matter how many swings turn miss  
The future is closer every day  
I choose to believe it will be saved by  
Those who made the choice to  
Focus on something better

Fixing our home together

Let's see if we're up to snuff

Sticking around when the going gets tough

Everywhere that I look I can see

People who are smarter than me

So many bright young minds

Just focus on getting better

Fixing our home together

(Chorus)

Seems like it might be time for change

Every part of our lives will be rearranged

Seems like it might be time for change

Every part of our lives will be rearranged

(Chorus)

Seems like it might be time for change

Every part of our lives will be rearranged

Seems like it might be time

Seems like it might be time

Seems like it might be time

Change

(Chorus)

Seems like it might be time for change

Every part of our lives will be rearranged

Seems like it might be time for change

Every part of our lives will be rearranged

(Refrain)

Seems like it might be time (*Repeated*)

(Final Verse)

Isn't it funny how we tell ourselves nothing can change?

But with a little bit of effort everything will rearrange

If you look down you'll notice that you're breathing

Take a minute, use your lungs, and just breathe in

(Chorus)

Seems like it might be time for change, changing, changing, change

Every part of our lives will be rearranged

Seems like it might be time for change