

INTRODUCTION

How does art function? It is an unnecessary,
useless activity that is vital.

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Far out in the uncharted backwaters of the unfashionable end
of the Western Spiral arm of the Galaxy lies a small unregarded
yellow sun. Orbiting this at a distance of roughly ninety-two
million miles is an utterly insignificant little blue-green planet
whose ape-descended life forms are so amazingly primitive that
they still think digital watches are a pretty neat idea.

THE HITCH HIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY, DOUGLAS ADAMS²

O great creator of being
Grant us one more hour to
Perform our art and perfect our lives.

"AN AMERICAN PRAYER", JIM MORRISON³

Courting creativity

In certain important ways the composing of a brilliant song or poem can be likened to coming up with an idea for a new product. In both instances the definition of creativity is the use of imagination to produce something new and valuable. This being so, perhaps the best way of understanding the dynamics of creativity is by analysing how creative people develop their ideas. This is what I intend to do in this book. For the record, most creative people are not business types. They are almost exclusively artists: novelists, poets, songwriters, composers, musicians, painters, sculptors, singers, dancers, actors or designers. Sometimes, however, they do come from business, and here I am thinking especially of the late Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple Inc., who was, in many respects, a genuine artist.

Formally therefore, through an examination of the critical components of artistry, this book's purpose is to help people be more creative about creativity. This cannot be rendered by means of a recipe or formula. Creativity is not a science in the

sense that it can be replicated by way of prescription. In its higher forms, creativity come from a very different place. This volume should therefore not be construed as a “how to” book or a “self-help guide”. Instead, its intent is to help people to be more creative, either through developing an appreciation of the requisite mindset or, perhaps better, by adopting some of the practical methods that nurture this mindset - and hopefully both.

My own creative crucible

As a child of the late '60s I was caught up in the wonder of The Beatles and Simon and Garfunkel. Later, my student rites of passage included discovering Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde* and *Desire*, and absorbing Robert Shelton's seismic Dylan biography, *No Direction Home*. And then there were the simultaneous ecstasies of finding Van Morrison and Jackson Browne, and also of moving inwards to unearth the rudiments of my own poetic voice when the muse came to call. At the time I honestly thought the world was going to explode. And then of course there was that other continent that was jazz.

Looking back through the telescope of the intervening years, I see now that the world was indeed exploding. There was an artistic uprising. Communism was falling and laissez-faire capitalism was stumbling in. It was a moment, our moment; the spirit of the age. The world was ripe for the plucking. But of course it never was plucked. With all this artistry, all this stellar insight and shimmering brilliance, the world was not beguiled by the beauty once promised in Joni Mitchell's “Woodstock”, the myriad brilliant butterflies radiant aflame above an expectant nation. It was stultified and boxed up and commoditised. Amazon arrived to sell its digital watches. And somehow the world capitulated.⁴

Seeking the Holy Grail

The artistry, however, has not disappeared. Those who wrote the magic music are now committed to writing their stories, recalling the facts and the circumstances. For the insight they offer, I have drawn heavily on these. Self-penned examples include those of singer-songwriters Bob Dylan: *Chronicles, Volume One*; Keith Richards: *Life*; Donald Fagen: *Eminent Hipsters*; and, most recently, Bruce Springsteen's superb *Born to Run*. Equally authoritative biographies include those on the lives of jazz musician Bill Evans: *How My Heart Sings* by Peter Pettinger; singer-songwriter Neil Young: *Shakey* by Jimmy McDonough; and Steve Jobs: *Steve Jobs*, by Walter Isaacson. Less specific information also exists in musical compendia and sundry news feeds – both online and in hard copy. In total, therefore, we have a multitude of sources offering

previously unavailable insights into the lives of contemporary artists. Arguably, we are in an unprecedented artistic sweet spot of direct and anecdotal account. The task, therefore, is one of synthesising this information into a coherent framework.

As already implied, and as a visit to any bookshop will show, the majority of creative biographies appear in the music section. This is for good reason. Those artists who pioneered the development of contemporary music - rock 'n' roll, folk and R&B - are at the end of their full and productive lives. Some have already passed on. It is the end of an era, though few of us have tumbled to its significance. While we celebrate the individual lives of those who have recently died, such as Michael Jackson, Leonard Cohen, David Bowie and Prince, the broader narrative of what this era of art represents as a whole has yet to be properly considered. So many stories wait to be told. The '50s, which saw the birth of rock music and its roll-out through radio, featured legends such as Muddy Waters, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, Chuck Berry and Elvis. The '60s witnessed the rise of social awareness: music rich with political ferment. The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan remain enduring icons of this passing age. The '70s and '80s, too, rode out the storm of a generation, grappling with war, drugs and ideological repression. Songwriters dominated the charts: Paul Simon, the Eagles, Leonard Cohen, James Taylor, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young. It was a time well before the fax machine. Technology was in its infancy. There was no internet and no digitisation. Music was analogue and days were spent curating the mix tapes that became the soundtracks to our lives.

I was part of a generation raised on radio, with a connection to the Billboard Top 20 verging on primal. It was the music that formed me, along with millions of kids growing up in the second half of the last century. This point is not flippantly made and should not be easily dismissed. For the uninitiated, understanding creativity and imagination through the lens of sculpture or ballet is hard work. Too many of us glaze over when confronted with room after room of 19th-century landscape art, and opera is an acquired taste, to put it mildly. Cognisant of this, I'm convinced that, for the majority of us, songs and the songwriting process offer a familiar point of entry into the broader tenets of the creative world.

Over the last 50 years, especially in America, much of what we would call “contemporary” art has taken shape around songwriting. Through the likes of Robert Johnson and Woody Guthrie, it became celebrated in the early parts of the 20th century, thereafter finding full force and articulation from the '60s and '70s onwards. Here are just three examples to illustrate my point on the primacy of songwriting as a mode of art. (1) The late Leonard Cohen began his working life as a poet, and it was only in his thirties, and no doubt on some reflection, that he converted to writing songs - an occupation that was for Cohen of an equal calling to, if not higher than,

the writing of verse. In 2011 he received the Prince of Asturias Award for Literature.

(2) In 1981, at the height of his powers, folk musician Dan Fogelberg released his double album *The Innocent Age*. In an epigraph attached to the album's lyric sheet, Fogelberg quoted a text from the classic US novel *Of Time and the River* by Thomas Wolfe: "Man's youth is a wonderful thing: It is so full of anguish and of magic and he never comes to know it as it is, until it has gone from him forever."⁵ In his review of the album entitled "Dan Fogelberg's time has arrived", Stephen Holden of the *New York Times* picked up on this reference and suggested that if Wolfe had been alive now, he too would have taken up with songwriting and not novels, such was the overwhelming spirit of music. Fogelberg succumbed to prostate cancer in 2007, but his music continues to attract interest. In 2013, Texas State University, San Marcos, awarded a master's in music degree to Laura Jones for her analysis of the album's artistic attainment in a thesis entitled *Dan Fogelberg's The Innocent Age: Poetics, Analysis, and Reception History*.⁶

(3) Perhaps the most obvious example of "songwriter as artist" is Bob Dylan, who received the 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature. "He's a great poet in the English tradition," explained Professor Sara Danius, permanent secretary at the Swedish Academy, which awards the prize. She also compared him with the poets of Ancient Greece: "Homer and Sappho - they wrote poetic texts that were meant to be performed with instruments - it's the same with Bob Dylan," said Danius. Professor Seamus Perry of Oxford University was equally emphatic about Dylan: "He is, more than any other, the poet of our times, as Tennyson was of his, representative and yet wholly individual, humane, angry, funny, and tender by turn; really, wholly himself, one of the greats."⁷ But what about those from a previous era; creative people whose work still touches our lives today? Finding out how they developed their ideas is virtually impossible. The true geniuses of the Enlightenment - Da Vinci, Michelangelo and Shakespeare - left little to account for the sources of their creativity. The same can be said of many driving the ensuing periods of art. Though well described as generalised epochs of creativity, the truth is that there remain precious few direct accounts describing the process by which those central protagonists went about their lives as artists. Given the dearth of information about pre-1945 artists, and the plethora about more recent ones, rolling it all into a cohesive narrative has been no easy task. As with almost all works of this nature, my artistic selections have not been driven by scientific or political considerations. They are deeply subjective, for my reading of the topic has been neither exhaustive nor objectively balanced, whatever that means. Let me state upfront, therefore, that in writing this book my wish has not been to offend, either by inclusion or by omission. Rather - and on the basis of my perspective as a business academic, a graduate with a major in English literature and a fan of music, writing and painting - my aim has been

to seek out something of a broader encompassing truth about creativity and its implications for the world today. If anything, I would suggest that the approach of this book is analogous to published wine guides such as Wine Spectator and Decanter. The reason for their popularity is hardly the unerring accuracy of their assessments but rather that discerning consumers have neither the time nor the budget, much less the livers, to wade through what is currently available on the market. Because the knowledge of wine professionals is difficult to acquire without serious time and investment, guides such as Wine Spectator and Decanter thus serve as proxies to the market. Moving to creativity, this book is similarly written, serving as a “market” synthesis to interested, though not necessarily specialist, readers who do not have the time or wherewithal to actively make the links between art and enterprise, but would willingly seek out a text that performs this task. This then is that book.

Who should read *Creativity Explained*?

The obvious answer is anyone interested in creativity. Certainly men and women in business would find it helpful. So, too, would the entrepreneur or university student studying business, or a change agent with enterprise in mind. Maybe you're someone looking to expand your existing skill set, or perhaps you're just wondering what it takes to be creative. As a project designed to provoke thought on creativity and suggesting possible ways of being more creative, this book may be helpful to you too.

But what do we mean by creativity? For artists, creativity is the practical outpouring of imagination. So, while imagination is largely a passive and often silent antecedent, creativity represents its consequent application. As practised by artists, creativity can thus be interpreted as the practical route by which original and valuable ideas are developed. The additional action of taking creatively crafted ideas and putting them into practice may be considered as innovation, which, in this sense, can be viewed as the latest “hot” product or service on offer. Innovation, then, is the final element in the idea process. Imagination leads to creativity, which in turn leads to innovation.

Those serious about innovation should follow these linkages backwards: from innovation to creativity and from creativity back to the development of imagination itself. Starting with basic principles, those in enterprise need first to think practically about how creativity actually works: under what conditions it tends to flourish and how it may be nurtured. Properly understood, these principles may, in turn, be applied to areas of innovation specific to each business discipline. For those businesses and enterprises genuinely seeking to reinvent themselves, this is what is required.

This book should not, however, be taken as a substitute for strategy. Mindful that each business is different and should reserve the right to develop approaches that suit

their strategic plans and needs, I recommend that aspects of this book be incorporated into pre-existing operational plans. In this sense, you might want to consider just one or two of the creative approaches suggested here. If these work, perhaps consider a few more. An incremental method would be far wiser than the unconditional conversion of existing practices into what is outlined here.

Book construction:

Section One: AN ARTISTIC OVERVIEW

1. The Artistic Sensibility

Section Two: THE ARTISTIC MINDSET

2. Artistic Grit
3. Passion
4. The Exiled Child
5. Depression, Madness & Addiction

Section Three: THE ARTISTIC DISCIPLINES

6. Proactivity
7. Practice
8. Perspective
9. Instinct, Intuition, the Unconscious & Still Water

Section Four: FATE

10. Success= Talent+ Luck

Section One: AN ARTISTIC OVERVIEW

Chapter 1: The Artistic Sensibility - We begin with a broad-spectrum overview of the general process of creativity. Regardless of the technology available, ideas are usually derived from a willingness to observe closely, to listen intently and to recognise emerging patterns. Properly marshalled, these aspects may be twinned with an ability to shed the inner critic, to find solitude and, when the moment is right, to act with fluency and integrity.

Following the first chapter, the book splits into an examination of the creative components relating to mindset and disciplines (Sections Two and Three respectively).

Section Two: THE ARTISTIC MINDSET

Chapter 2: Artistic Grit - Two aspects of grit are explored: (1) the strength to persevere coupled with the ability to push on regardless of the odds, and (2) moral integrity. The chapter closes with a look at the relationship of grit to the potentially compromising influences of political and economic power.

Chapter 3: Passion - Here, I look at how passion expresses itself through creativity and thereby acts as a catalyst for art. Considered are the questions of “artistic vocation” and the romantic concept of *báraka* or the lightning strike of supernatural inspiration many refer to as “the muse”. The theme of inspiration is picked up later as a key component of artistic practice.

Chapter 4: The Exiled Child - This chapter explores the concept of the “inner child”: a sense of self characterised by innocence, simplicity and a willingness to make mistakes. These qualities are not typically adult because they are split off and exiled at an early age. Artists such as Bruce Springsteen speak about the struggle to locate and articulate the child's inner voice. Finally, although there are some examples of artistic collaboration, we see that in the realms of deep-end creativity, individual insight appears to be more prominent than genuine teamwork.

Chapter 5: Depression, Madness & Addiction - These markers of suffering have been shown to correlate significantly with creative output. Along with artists, some of the great entrepreneur-businessmen also appear to exhibit traits of instability and pathology. The effects of alcohol and drugs are assessed, with the fatal addictions of Bill Evans and Ernest Hemingway acting as examples.

Section Three: THE ARTISTIC DISCIPLINES

Chapter 6: Proactivity- Here I look at why proactivity is the engine of productivity and creative energy, and consider which factors may serve to undermine it. Through the lives of Steve Jobs, Marvin Gaye, Sting and James Taylor, I review the debilitating influence of genetic disposition, psychological make-up and the social environment.

Chapter 7: Practice - I examine the contentious role of practice in the development of art, reviewing, especially, Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000-hour rule - the practice time required to attain a level of world-class mastery. Recent research has found that the importance of 10,000 hours will vary, depending on the structural stability of the discipline and the level of cognitive complexity. This chapter looks at both.

Chapter 8: Perspective - Here I turn to the issue of perspective and its contribution to artistic invention, examining also why good artists resist forced interpretation through the use of multiple perspectives. The critical art periods - Impressionism, Cubism and Surrealism - are introduced, together with insights from Steve Jobs and Bruce Springsteen.

Chapter 9: Instinct, Intuition, the Unconscious & Still Water - The spotlight is on the role of the unconscious as I consider how artists tend to approach their work instinctively, exploring specifically the concept of the muse through looking at intuitive aspects that framed the art of greats such as Bill Evans and Jackson Pollock. This chapter also looks at the importance of an unhurried life, demonstrating that the best artists act on ideas from a space of “less hurry”, so as to “control the burn”, as Neil Young once put it. Many creative insights have emerged from periods of sleep or quiet contemplation; this chapter lists a few to illustrate.

Section Four: FATE

Chapter 10: Success = Talent + Luck - The final section considers the role of luck versus ability in determining success, examining the business instincts of artists such as Charles Dickens, Andy Warhol and Bruce Springsteen. As some showed less business savvy than others, to what extent can we attribute success to chance? Also considered is whether it is more useful to think of luck as that place where preparedness meets opportunity. In other words, without the necessary preparation, even the greatest talent risks being squandered.

Introduction

¹ Kentridge quote: cited from *The Triumphs and Laments of William Kentridge*, aired on BBC, 11 February 2017.

² Adams, D. (1979) *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, Pan, London (p. 7).

³ Jim Morrison, "An American Prayer":

www.absolutelyrics.com/lyrics/view/the_doors/an_american_prayer

⁴ Commodification is not a bad thing in and of itself. As Henry Ford demonstrated, it makes things cheaper. However, if commodification is the only thing done – which is the implication made by Adams – then it is a problem, not least of all because it stifles creativity.

⁵ Wolfe, T. (1935) *Of Time and the River*. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York (p. 454).

⁶ Master's in Music degree awarded by Texas State University, San Marcos, to Laura Jones, for her analysis of the album as an artistic achievement in a thesis entitled *Dan Fogelberg's The Innocent Age: Poetics, Analysis, and Reception History*".

<https://digital.library.txstate.edu/bitstream/handle/10877/4537/JONES-THESIS-2013.pdf?sequence=1>

⁷ www.telegraph.co.uk/music/news/breaking-bob-dylan-wins-2016-nobel-prize-in-literature/