section **one**

AN ARTISTIC OVERVIEW

chapter one

The Artistic Sensibility

HOW DO ARTISTS COME UP WITH THEIR IDEAS? Regardless of the technology available, ideas are usually derived from an artistic disposition and a willingness to observe and listen intently. This chapter shows how moments of artistic greatness are further underpinned by an ability to find solitude, to shed the inner critic and, when the moment is right, to act with fluency and integrity. Through the lens of work by Rainer Maria Rilke, Bob Dylan, Keith Richards, Leonard Cohen and Bill Evans, this introductory chapter explores each of these aspects.

> I want to extol the crucial importance of imagination.
> JK ROWLING[1]

> The true sign of intelligence is not knowledge but imagination.
> ALBERT EINSTEIN

> I read an article about Jean Sibelius. He couldn't have the window open when he was composing 'cause if he did he would hear birds in the trees and they'd get into the composition. So his family used to go and have to chase the birds.
> ELVIS COSTELLO[2]

> Steve Allen used to take the telephone line, and then when different birds would sit at different places on the wire, he would write it out and look at the lines of the telephone wires as a staff, and he would put the notes where the birds would be and he would play it.
> TOM WAITS[3]

While artistic creativity preceded capitalism by a long chalk, their genesis is the same: imagination being the wellspring, and innovation its expression. Cast your mind back to childhood, when the best games and adventures were hatched by an unfettered and fertile imagination that produced something new, different and exciting. Such childlike imaginings may be said to characterise any range of creative expressions,

spanning works of art as well as acts of entrepreneurship. The common thread is actualised innovation that seeks to change things (for the better), be it social, green or profit making. To help define the characteristics that go hand in hand with creativity, the primal ground of artistic imagination thus provides us with a relevant foundation from which to do so.

There are so many great artists, so many paths to the destination, but let us begin by probing what it means to be an artist and what constitutes that something we call art. Illustrious minds have acknowledged that it complements almost all other disciplines and offers a unique way of seeing things. Friedrich Nietzsche the 19th-century Existentialist philosopher observed, for example, that it would be best if science could be viewed from the perspective of the artist and art from the viewpoint of life.[4] The 1922 Nobel Prize-winning Danish scientist Niels Bohr concurred, explaining to Werner Heisenberg, his friend and fellow scientist, that "when it comes to atoms, language can be used only as poetry". Poetry, he maintained, is not nearly so concerned with describing facts as with creating images. The image is all-important and what lies below or beyond the visible world is always imaginary. Poetry, maintained Bohr, is the only way to talk about the invisible, whether it be in nature, art or science.[5]

Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple Inc., was equally clear about this, stating that Apple's DNA encompassed the view that technology by itself was not enough. It was only when technology was married with the humanities that magic could happen, he said.[6] Jobs suggested that the reason Apple connected so well with people was the pervading sense of humanity within their innovative products. Great artists and great engineers are similar he said, in that they both seek self-expression. Looking back on the early days of Apple, Jobs observed that, in the '70s, computers became a way for people to express their creativity. This view resonates strongly with the work of Isambard Brunel and other engineers in the 19th century who used steel as a new form of artistry in the vast bridges they helped design and build. "In fact," insisted Jobs, "some of the best people working on the original Mac were poets and musicians on the side ... Great artists like Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo were also great at science. Michelangelo knew a lot about how to quarry stone, not just how to be a sculptor."[7]

In his definition of art, contemporary artist Damien Hirst was equally expansive. He is on record as stating that anything clone "super-well" is art, including, in his view, a splendid meal or even a great meeting or event. "Artists make art from what's around them", he said.[8] Ernest Hemingway, winner of the 1954 Nobel Prize in Literature, however, took exception to this view on the common universality of art. Writing about how Degas had captured the true colours of a misty dawn, Hemingway

was struck by how the Impressionist had managed to depict the light in such a way that it appeared truer on his canvas than what was ordinarily visible. This form of depiction, he declared, was the role of the artist. “On canvas or on the printed page, he must capture the thing so truly that its magnification will endure. That is the difference between journalism and literature. There is very little literature. Much less than we think.”[9] Between the views of Hirst and Hemingway lies something of the truth.

This said, how best should we proceed with the actual making of art? What do we need to acquire or shed, revert to or become, in order to be artists? Former Police frontman and subsequent solo artist Sting acknowledged the extent to which his songs seldom carry with them a unique conceptual pedigree and that the art of his writing is about synthesis. “I think that what we do in pop music is collate. It's like folk music. It makes copyright a bit interesting and difficult. I'm a good collator,” he owned.[10] This falls in line with the view of 20th-century composer Igor Stravinsky, who is quoted as saying, half-jokingly: “A good composer does not imitate, he steals.”[11]

Steve Jobs once took his Apple design team to see an exhibition of Tiffany glass at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan. Jobs believed that they could learn from Louis Tiffany's example of creating great art that could be produced in volume. As a result, one of the Apple team members, Bud Tribble, recalled the designers agreeing that, if they were going to make things that would permeate our lives, they should at least make them as beautiful as possible.[12] Although Jobs’ line was computers, he is widely acknowledged as a genuine artist. In 1983, he confessed to former Apple CEO John Sculley that had he not been working in IT he'd be in Paris writing poetry.[13] He railed against sterile business meetings and sterile thinking, stating that he hated the way people employed slide presentations as a proxy for genuine thinking. People tend to challenge an issue by creating a presentation, complained Jobs, who preferred hashing things out on a whiteboard to sitting passively through “a bunch of slides”.[14]

About the craft of songwriting, singer and songwriter Tom Waits' suggestion is a practical one: listen to what the world has to say. In 1976, reflecting on his formative nights as a doorman in a Los Angeles nightclub, Waits recalled how he would listen to all the acts from the door, hearing bluegrass, comics, folk ~ingers, and string bands. At the same time, he was picking up people's conversations in all-night coffee shops - ambulance drivers, cabdrivers, street sweepers. “I did research there as an evening curator, and I started writing, gingerly,” said Waits. “I thought at some point I'd like to forge it all into something meaningful, and give it dignity.”[15] A year

later he was elaborating to Rolling Stone: “I listened to all kinds of music there. All kinds of stuff from rock to jazz to folk to anything else that happened to walk in. One night I saw a local guy onstage playing his own material. I don't know why, but at that moment I knew that I wanted to live or die on the strength of my own music. I finally played a gig there. Then I started writing down people's conversations as they sat around the bar. When I put them together I found some music hiding in there.”[16] Just on a decade later, in 1985, Waits served up an equivalent idea: to go to New York. In such a vast and restless city all you then had to do was get into a cab, ask the driver to show you around the city, and start writing down the shops and happenings that you saw through the window: typically the dry cleaners, dog parlours, tyre fitment centres, hot dog stands, drugstores, estate agents, and so on. The assignment was to compose a song using all these words.[17] It seems Waits was a man for all seasons, sometime later advising yet another creative strategy: “break windows, smoke cigars, and stay up late”. Hoodlum behaviour would definitely lead to wealth and riches, he maintained.[18]

As wry and paradoxical as these disparate forms of counsel appear; in all instances Waits is correct: at base he is requiring us to he fully aware, fully immersed and fully alive. Being engaged in the raw sensuality of existence implies a state devoid of any internal or external criticism, especially when you're serving as a doorman or breaking windows. He resembles something of the fool in King Lear, making nonsensical utterances that, on closer inspection, make absolute sense. Shedding responsibility and observing an oblique twilight world of few obligations enables you to find a space within you that is seldom accessed. It is a carefree place, a place to take risks and not care about the consequences: hangovers, cancers, run-ins with the law, whatever. In some respects, this represents a slightly older, more adolescent version of the uninhibited spaces of children.

Pablo Picasso, who maintained that children arc horn artists, would have agreed, as would film director David Lynch, who commented that while we think we understand the rules when we become adults, what we actually experience is a narrowing of imagination. This being moot, the obvious question is where all the art goes when we grow up and the inner child is ushered out of our adult lives. How do we re-acquire our potential for artistry in a world of adult artifice and indifference - and is there a process that describes this?

The best response to this critical question, 1 believe, comes from the founding head of the Santa Fe Institute economic think-tank, W. Brian Arthur, who maintains that all true innovation is based on a sense of inner knowing. Arthur describes a three part creative process[19] that, as you will read further in this book, dovetails with many of the insights offered by artists in practice.

1. The first phase of this process is acute observation. By this, Arthur meant that we must arrest the orthodox style of information downloading and, instead, simply start listening. This, according to Arthur, implies forsaking our ingrained styles of functioning and, instead, immersing ourselves in situations that offer us the most potential creative leverage. (More on this shortly.)

2. The second part involves sufficient withdrawal and reflection to allow an innate sense of understanding to surface. Withdrawal cannot be hurried or forced. It requires time and discipline, with revelation often emerging serendipitously, in moments of what I shall later term "still water": a Zen-like place embracing both immobility and action, with a degree of inactivity above the surface and yet, deep beneath, a great stirring. Still-water moments typically arrive unannounced and on their own terms, often when we are not actively searching. We are merely waiting, watching and listening: sometimes contemplatively, in meditation, or even prayerfully in enduring periods of silence. Van Morrison is one of the great singer-songwriters who understand and speak of this yielding of self to greater forces of creativity and insight.

3. The third part of this process is about inspired action: seizing the moment when it finally arrives, and acting immediately and as completely as possible. David Crosby, former member of the Byrds, and later the '70s super-group Crosby, Stills and Nash, said that when the muse struck there was no holding back, no deliberating. "I didn't have control over what came out of my pen," he confessed.[20] This is a process of letting go, of outpouring, of finally getting on and expressing in unhindered fashion the essence of what you've acquired during observation and withdrawal. This is no longer about holding back. It's a moment of ignition and release.

   Though each of these components is more fully described in the chapters that follow, for now let's briefly examine just two: namely the first phase of observation and the third phase of inspired action.

Observation

Cognitive theorists such as Daniel Kahneman[21] argue that the role of attentive mastery is crucial to real observation, as it enables pattern recognition, allowing older hands to join the dots where the lesser experienced might not see the dots at all. This ability to sense even without necessarily knowing and understanding why explains how an

experienced fireman can sense when a fire is about to become seriously dangerous, allowing him to give the order to evacuate. Juniors would struggle to make the call because they can't read the signs.[22] Similarly, in the opening chapter of his book Blink, Malcolm Gladwell tells the story of how a museum expert was able to call an allegedly 2500-year-old Greek artefact a fake, though without being able to say why.[23] It boiled down to intuition, a cognitive process that, according to the respected researcher-psychologist Seymour Epstein, reduces directly to pattern recognition.[24]

My own research has shown how this process of pattern recognition improves with age. Using blind and sighted paired tastings of products such as cheese, wine, orange juice and coffee, I have shown how older, more experienced tasters tend to use price as a proxy for quality, rating expensive products more highly than cheaper ones, regardless of intrinsic quality.[25] This form of pattern recognition is an unconscious process of course; we are unaware of the effect of the price cue when we sip an expensive wine or taste a cheaply priced Cheddar.

So what is it about innovative people that enables them to spot the pattern of creative opportunities where the rest of us do not? Over time, we all increasingly make use of pattern recognition cues, but in some this skill is undoubtedly sharper than in others. Robin Gibb of the Bee Gees was a genius at this. Before he died, Gibb recalled how his ear had become so attuned to the environment that he composed the melody for "I Started a Joke" after hearing the pitch of a British Airways Vickers Viscount plane engine. "If the bells of that church over there went now I could hear a melody in that that other people couldn't, the harmonics for instance, and my ears will pick it out, only because I've been doing it for so long," explained Gibb. "The extraordinary thing is that you can hear melody if you've got your antennae up. The ear gets an extra sense to it. It's like playing Scrabble: you're constantly looking for seven-letter words."[26] Of course it's difficult to predict which people will be better at this but, with artists, we can observe through their writings and reflections how they have come to produce the work they have. There are certainly learnings here.

Take contemporary British playwright Roy Williams, for instance. As his dad had disappeared when he was two years old and his mom worked nightshifts, as a young boy, Williams was left at home with a babysitter and the telly. Such was his situation that, to this day, he can recall arbitrary episodes of Bergerac from 1978, the names of actors and their respective roles. "[I]t's quite scary," he says. "I don't let on a lot about that. I was just that kind of kid. I absorbed everything."[27]

Artists from the 19th-century Impressionism school were also profound practitioners of absorption: of watching and then watching some more. Vincent van Gogh is renowned for his paintings of sunflowers. Displayed in Amsterdam's Van Gogh Museum are numerous versions of the same theme; he was fixated on drawing

out the fundamental nature of the sunflower. Claude Monet, in his attempt to capture the play of fading light on a set of haystacks, painted a sequence of canvasses depicting the same scene, each rendering different colorations as the sun set to the west. Pierre-Auguste Renoir painted five versions of his two girls at the piano, and Paul Cézanne painted repetitive scenes of apples and also a set of mountains near the town of Aix, in the south of France. On a visit to the Musée de l'Orangerie art museum in the Tuileries Gardens in Paris, the audio guide informed me that few models were ever prepared to sit for him for the lengthy periods he required. Such was the acute and painstaking process of Cézanne's observation of his subjects that the pace of his painting was simply too slow for most models to endure, and this is why, it was said, that Cezanne could only ever paint apples and landscapes.

On the topic of deep, deep, observation, Hemingway gave Cezanne much credit: "I learned how to make a landscape from Mr Paul Cezanne by viewing his painting at the Luxembourg Museum a thousand times on an empty gut, and I'm pretty sure that if Mr Paul was around, he would like the way I write them and be happy that I learned from him."[28]

As a poet in training, the then young German poet Rainer Maria Rilke asked of the aged Cezanne how to write great poetry. His advice, not too dissimilar from Torn Waits', was to sit in front of one's intended subject matter and observe it over a prolonged period. Thus, after a week's scrutiny in the Paris Zoo, Rilke came to write "The Panther". (Entrepreneurs in training, too, would do well to take note of the advice.)

The Panther
His gaze those bars keep passing is so misted
with tiredness, it can take in nothing more.
He feels as though a thousand bars existed,
and no more world beyond them than before.

Those supply-powerful paddings, turning there
in the tiniest of circles, well might be
the dance of forces round a centre where
some mighty will stands paralyticly.

Just now and then the pupil's noiseless shutter
is lifted. Then an image will indart,
down through the limbs' intensive stillness flutter
and end its being in the heart.

Translation: J.B. Leishman

Rilke would go on to develop a particularly spiritual sensibility and his work is still much revered today. When I read his work, I am always amazed how it prompts me to think: that's so true, why haven't I thought of that? Of course this is what makes him such a great poet: his ability to express complex ideas so simply that commoners feel the words speak to them too.

The British sculptor Henry Moore maintained that acute feats of observation were critical in the search for new perspectives. “The observation of nature is part of an artist's life,” he wrote in 1934. “It enlarges his form-knowledge, keeps him fresh and from working only by formula, and feeds inspiration.”[29] This describes songwriter and rhythm guitarist of The Rolling Stones, Keith Richards, to a T. In his autobiography Life, Richards speaks of the exacting requirements of Rilke-like observation and of how these skills have juiced his powers of creativity. Through reading about his music career, which dates back to the early '60s, the extent to which he dominated the Stones' songwriting process becomes clear. So while he and Mick Jagger share credit for most of the Stones' songs, it was in fact Richards who would first develop each song's architectural “riff”, firing up the initial tune and a basic raft of words, which he would then pass on to Jagger for lyrical development. Richards was, as he puts it in Life, the butcher, carving off slabs of musical meat, which Jagger would then refine and embellish. About observation, Richards writes that when you realise you are a songwriter, in order to provide the material you need, you have to become an observer first and then, within this process, two things happen. Firstly, you distance yourself and, secondly, you are constantly on the alert. In time, that sense of alertness becomes ingrained within you as you observe people and how they interact. Observation, he writes, makes you oddly distant, a voyeur of sorts. “You shouldn't really be doing it,” says Richards. “It's a little of Peeping Tom to be a songwriter. You start looking around, and everything's a subject for a song. The banal phrase, which is the one that makes it. And you say, I can't believe nobody hooked up on that one before! Luckily there are more phrases than songwriters, just about.”[30]

Glenn Frey, major-league songwriter of the Eagles, was also a composer-voyeur of note. In a documentary tracing the roots of the Eagles' phenomenal success in the '70s, Frey related the tale of how he stumbled upon one of the key tracks off their 1976 Hotel California album: “Life in the Fast Lane”. “I was riding shotgun in a Corvette with a drug dealer on the way to a poker game,” said Frey, “and the next thing I knew we were going at 90 miles an hour, holding [presumably drugs] big time. And I said: ‘Hey man, what are you doing?’ You know and he looked at me and goes: ‘Life in the fast lane.’ And I thought immediately: now there's a song title.”[31] A song

about the rancid L.A. high-life, “Life in the Fast Lane” would become the third single off Hotel California, peaking at no 11 on the Billboard 100.[32]

The observational skills of the great American abstract painter Jackson Pollock were also remarkable. As his friend Nick Carone recalled: “When Jackson looked at something, it was as if he were getting into the pores of it, the most minute molecular structure of it; the level at which even the most insignificant thing, like c1n ashtray, has a life and is constantly moving.”[33] A similar tale of observation arises in the case of singer-songwriter Bob Dylan, who in 1974 met a 73-year-old art teacher, Norman Raeben, who had no idea who Dylan was. The old man was a demanding teacher and would not tolerate shoddy work. Dylan is reported to have enjoyed the anonymity and the possibility of being treated as an ordinary equal. He enrolled to do some lessons. One of the first things the old man required of his class was to sketch a vase. Raeben is reported to have placed the vase on a table, exclaiming: “Draw this!” then promptly removed it. His pupils were left to draw the vase from memory. It was an observational discipline that Dylan never forgot.[34]

The work of the late British abstract artist Howard Hodgkin is profoundly emblematic of the practice of observation: of consciously interrogating the inner world while at the same time watching the outer, capturing the spirit of a thing and reducing it to its essence. According to novelist and art critic William Boyd, Hodgkin was much like the early 20th-century artist Paul Klee, who writes of being “abstract with memories”,[35] awash with recollection and memory, trying to decipher it all and distil its truth.

This, again, is akin to the entrepreneur, flush with his or her first profound insight, struggling to bring the primitive prototype to life through endless tinkering and enquiry, ongoing mutations and iterations. Nothing being complete, nothing remaining permanent. Think of Google here, of the first Lego-framed search engines, clunking away. Like Hodgkin's paintings, these early versions were merely metaphorical portents, straining at the leash of currently available computational power: shadowings of a broader vision relentlessly seeking self-expression. Google's key insight - applying (statistical) regression-analysis techniques in traditionally 1,011-quantifiable domains such as the internet - has a direct crossover with the imaginative longings of art. According to art critic William Boyd, “What we are talking about here is a particular stimulus common to certain works of art where visceral delight cohabits with analytical curiosity or even analytical imperatives.”[36] As the acerbic author Dorothy Parker once wrote: “The cure for boredom is curiosity. There is no cure for curiosity.” Steve Jobs, however, reported being almost cured of his innate boyhood curiosity while at school. “I was kind of bored for the first few years so I occupied myself with getting into trouble. I encountered authority of a different kind than I had

ever encountered before, and I did not like it. And they really almost got me. They came close to beating any curiosity out of me."[37]

Lauded South African artist Jean Welz is another who was renowned for his refined and driven sense of the aesthetic. Such was his acute and restless sense of observation that he would often rework paintings which, years earlier, he had deemed complete, sometimes signed, and even sold. For example, if, with the passing of years, the Austrian-born Welz decided that a particular painting still required resolution, without hesitation he would rework it until he was satisfied with what he wanted. In this respect, his biographer, Elza Miles, noted: "Certain works subjected to this transformation process were naturally altered totally. Others were destroyed."[38] Miles held that Welz's unerring vision for perfection lay in the almost Zen-like "equivocal nature of truth". This search for the core truth is something that sets great artists apart. The story of Welz's still-life painting entitled Baroque is a case in point, being reworked some 25 times! Ultimately bequeathed to his children, this modernist turquoise rendition began in the period 1958/59 under the title Large Architectonic Still Life With Urn. Following several subsequent iterations, it was presented in 1962 at an exhibition of the University of Cape Town's Michaelis School of Fine Art, this time entitled Baroque. Even the favourable press reviews of the time did not dissuade him from further adjustments. Said Miles of Welz: "For him truth and reality could not be seen only in one dimension, and through each refinement of the image he attempted to interpret and expose another of its facets."[39]

A wonderful anecdote concerning Welz is derived from his time in Worcester, in the Western Cape, where he was principal of the Hugo Naudé Art Centre. During the 1942 Easter school holidays he devoted his art lessons to drawing, frequently outdoors. One of his students at the time, Rae Matthee, recalled how afternoons would be spent going through his art books and, in this way, extending their lessons into the realm of art history. Here Welz spent much time emphasising the works of the Impressionists, especially Cézanne. In her last art lesson with Welz, he placed an apple on a chair and asked her to draw not simply the visible form of this particular apple, but in shades of Cézanne, to go further and draw "the soul of all apples". This was his way of attempting to expose his students, in a non-onerous way, to each artist's search for the unrevealed character of the material world, to ground real creation in artistic discipline, and to strive for the continuous transformation from the intimate to the symbolic.

Friend and fellow painter Cecil Higgs said: "When Jean Welz paints a quince or an avocado pear, it is better than seeing a real quince or a real avocado pear, not because man's paintings are better to look at than God's fruit, but because the painting enables us to perform the miracle of feeling with someone else's uniquely different

senses. It is partly like discovering for the first time, this part of creation, for through other eyes it is an orient freshness, brilliantly new. How extraordinarily beautiful, all at once, a quince is; the quince in the painting is just like a real quince, but in it one feels the peculiar shape, the fullness, the firmness of the quinces, as qualities so wonderful that they make the pulse beat higher, an avocado pear looks like a real avocado pear but how the senses caress it - how they linger over the dark rough rind, assessing the exact degree of roughness, how our eyes gloat as they feel its exact degree of plumpness and fullness." For Welz, this ongoing mission to render the non-visual, innate and enduring nature of the subject became a poetic journey - the painting of poetry. "The end result of every work should be a piece of poetry. To look for that is my passion and my justification," he said in 1965.[40]

Inspired action

The question of being in the zone - in that uncritical space where you can simply create what is waiting to manifest within you - is pivotal to the rendition of great art and is beautifully explained through an incident relating to jazz pianist Bill Evans, shortly before his death in 1980, aged just 51. Warren Bernhardt, whom Evans was mentoring, was paying attention to the master as he played. Bernhardt reported that Evans, even though severely hooked on cocaine at the time, was playing magnificently. He recalled how Evans, in such zone-like moments, when musical conditions were perfect, said he could get every molecule in that environment to begin reverberating in a new and higher order, a quantum leap from the conditions of everyday. This, recalled Bernhardt, was something Evans could actually observe while it was happening.[41] Bernhardt, no slouch himself, went on to work with Steely Dan, touring as musical director and pianist in 1993 and 1994 when the duo put out their live set Alive in America.

Winner of the 1973 Nobel Prize in Literature, Patrick White was another who found the flow, uncritically pouring himself onto paper in the first phase of writing his great Australian novels. By avoiding his inner critic, White opened himself up to the artistic-unconscious within him. The first draft of a Patrick White novel was thus stream-of-consciousness (typical of his writing style anyway), the words literally gushing forth as if from a spring in one long, sustained, uncritical burst - typically in the deep of night, and usually assisted by alcohol. The process of getting the words out and onto paper as rapidly and uncensored as possible was essential to the creation of his art, he told his biographer, David Marr.[42] In this mode he was at his least critical and simply and, most importantly, in the "zone".

Later, much later, when the entire book had been rendered in this rough-hewn form (a process that took about three months), he would resume with a critical eye

and redraft the piece a further two times. The third draft would be the version finally submitted to his publishers. Though largely forgotten by contemporary readers, White was a giant of his period - and books such as Voss (1957), adapted as an opera by Richard Meale, and The Solid Mandala (1966), his personal favourite, are seriously worth reading. A later novel, The Vivisector, received posthumous recognition in 2010 when it was shortlisted for the Lost Man Booker Prize for 1970. While be has long been one of my favourite writers, perhaps a more significant referral comes from the great Van Morrison, who is reported to have enjoyed his work immensely.

Bruce Springsteen's style of composition is also worth noting, despite the level of banality that seemingly overlies this process of magic. In his biography, Bruce, author Peter Ames Carlin reported on how ordinary days would begin at around 11 o'clock with a bowl of Cheerios, after which Springsteen would mosey into town for a look-see and maybe to pick up some food. Back home, by mid-afternoon the Boss would be ready to work with the muse, tinkering on the piano or just plain sitting on his bed strumming his six-string. Thus he would spend wordless hours waiting for the moment to arrive. This state of watchful waiting, of being so absorbed in an enjoyable activity that you lose track of your sense of time and space, is something we have all experienced. It is, variously, known as "the zone", "the alpha state of mind" and "flow". Trying to describe the creative process, Springsteen said: "When you're writing well, you're not exactly sure how you've done it, or if you'll ever do it again. You're looking for the element you can't explain. The element that breathes life and character into the people or situation you're writing about." Warming to the theme of just how difficult it is to locate the space in yourself that enables creation, the Boss said: "So to do that, you gotta tap something more than ... well, it can't just he math. There's got to be some mystical aspect to it. And when that third element arrives, it's sort of one and one makes three."[43] The molten classic "Born to Run" is reported to have emerged in this way. Recently single, Springsteen had rented a small house west of Long Branch, New Jersey. Beside an open notebook, he strummed idly on his guitar, fishing for an idea from the depths. Then three words appeared in his mind: "born to run". Springsteen later recalled how he had liked the phrase because the cinema it had conjured in his head was sparked off by Brian Wilson's "Don't Worry Baby", which he was listening to at the time. (The songs are played in the same key and deal with the same themes.) It would take many more weeks to smooth it all out but this was the moment when the heart of the song presented itself.[44]

Through Springsteen's idle noodlings, we can begin to understand how, with analysis and self-criticism out of the way, creativity may be invited to step out and express itself. The rasping Tom Waits argued that, while everybody loves music, for creativity to happen you want the opposite: that is for music to love you. He cautioned

that this required a certain respect for the creative process. Music is writing you, you are not writing the music and, in this situation, you serve as the instrument through which music will be scripted.[45] Keith Richards of The Rolling Stones said pretty much the same thing: that songwriting requires ongoing tinkering and experimentation. For Richards the creative process has always been an unconscious one. He's never actively set out to write such and such a song; the process is always indirectly achieved.[46] Seventies folk-hero James Taylor agreed about this selfless aspect of songwriting. Speaking about the truly great songs he's written, such as “Sweet Baby James”, “Fire and Rain” and “Carolina in My Mind”, he said: “Yes they are good songs, I still sing them, I still connect with them, and I am thrilled to have written them. But I don't really feel as though I write songs, I feel as if I hear them first, and remember them and get them down. But it's such a mysterious and sub-conscious process that I couldn't really say that I wrote those songs. I just channelled them; they happened to me first ... There is a sort of lightning bolt kind of moment when you are visited by a song; sometimes a whole song, sometimes just a fragment. And you have to collect those fragments and later on sequester yourself, hide away somewhere and work them.”[47]

Taylor's view chimes with that of Bob Dylan, who argued that the artist should approach his work like an athlete: highly trained and deeply instinctual. Said Geffen Records executive Carole Childs of Dylan's uncanny abilities as a composer: “He would [write songs] as if he were a canary ... He writes those songs alone. He is his own man. He stands proud in his shoes. He don't need nobody to do nothin’. He's that gifted and that talented.”[48] Dylan is reported to have told Steve Jobs about the songs he wrote back in the ‘60s and ‘70s. “They just came through me,” he said. “It wasn't like I was having to compose them.”[49] Near the end of his life, Jobs remained staggered by the creative mystery that was Dylan, confessing that he couldn't figure out how he'd done it when he was so young, (quite ironically perhaps, given his own ability as a once-young artist-entrepreneur). Notwithstanding his remarkable talents, Dylan has remained watchful of his song-craft, and a keen observer of the inner dynamics that sought to undermine his ability to write well. As you get older you get smarter, he observed, and this can serve as a hindrance as your smartness tends to gain control over the creative impulse. Creativity, he maintained, is something that does not enjoy control and stricture; it's not a train on rails that can simply be shunted around. Rather, creativity is to be treated with care and respect; not controlled by the mind. “If your mind is intellectually in the way, it will stop you,”[50] he said. And so you have to train your brain to let go and not to theorise too much. Looking back at that hallowed time when writing came easily as pure water from a spring, Dylan reflected on the process of songwriting: “Still staying in the unconscious frame of

mind, you can pull yourself out and throw up two rhymes first and work it back. You get the rhymes first and work it back to see if you can make sense of it another way. You can still stay in the unconscious frame of mind to pull it off, which is the state of mind you have to be in anyway."[51] Artists like Dylan appear especially good at this: not thinking about what they are doing, or elaborating on why they think or act this way, but rather just doing. Said singer-songwriter Neil Young of Dylan's remarkable capacity to tap into the unconscious: "That's so powerful. You can't keep that. That comes and goes through you. You can't strive to be that. There's no way you own it. It's a gift that keeps on giving. It goes away, then it comes back, if you're ready to accept it it's there. I've heard Bob say that he doesn't know the guy who wrote those songs anymore ... I understand what he's saying. I understand the feeling behind it."[52]

T.S. Eliot believed that poets do many things by instinct, for which they can seldom give a better account than anybody else.[53] The act was all; it was never intentionally rational or intended in such a way that it could be explained in a rational format, such as a recipe or a piece of machinery. On the topic of songwriting, '70s British singer-songwriter Elvis Costello offered this insight: "I don't want to sound spiritual, but I try to make an antenna out of myself, a lightning rod out of myself, so that whatever is out there can come in. It happens in different places, in hotels, in the car, when somebody else is driving."[54] In 2016, 12-time Grammy winner Paul Simon shared a similar view when reflecting back half a century to his writing of the epic "Sounds of Silence": "I was really too young to know that there are times when – I don't want to sound silly - but when you are plugged into the universe and all of a sudden something comes through you, and it's yours but it isn't yours ... It comes out and you don't know were it comes from. I don't know why or how I wrote that song when I was 21 or 22 years old. It was certainly beyond me."[55]

The emotionally charged poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen also confessed to the complexities of his craft: "Songwriting is basically a courting process," he pronounced back in 1972. "Like hunting women. Most of the times it's a hassle."[56] Some four decades later, at the 2011 Prince of Asturias Awards, he was less flippant, noting this in the lead-up to the actual award: "When I was packing in Los Angeles, I had a sense of unease because I've always felt some ambiguity about an award for poetry. Poetry comes from a place that no one commands, that no one conquers. So I feel somewhat like a charlatan to accept an award for an activity which I do not command. In other words, if I knew where the good songs came from I would go there more often."[57]

Hearing comments like this from truly great recording artists such as Waits, Richards, Taylor, Simon, Dylan, Costello and Cohen should force you to sit up and pay attention. For, clearly and independently, they all agree that important work does

not come from ego-driven showmanship but rather from a process of letting go. As Paul Simon recently reminded the students of Yale: "The less ego there is, the more efficient your thinking will be. Don't judge it and don't listen to what other people judge."[58] This attitude of detachment cuts directly across the self-importance of many contemporary would-be creator-entrepreneurs. Money, a sense of power and an overriding ego are not keys to this universe. Rather the spirit of creativity sources from a deep and inward process of immersion and an ultimate commitment to discipline and integrity. The route to proper art, seemingly, has no obvious shortcuts and does not trade in worldly currencies.

Being yourself

Let us turn to the question of authenticity and its bedfellow, the suspension of criticism. Since creativity requires an open mind, the inner voice of judgement has to be silenced. Withholding this voice means suspending the habit of error detection ingrained through years of social conditioning, and creating a new space for marvel and self-investigation. If we fail to silence the upwelling of self-judgement, all attempts to enter places of potential creativity will be in vain. This is very much the approach advocated in The Artist's Way, in which the author, Julia Cameron, asks students to keep a diary of negative self-criticisms.[59] Logging these self-critical feelings gives them an avenue of expression and, in doing so, allows the artistic non-criticised aspects of self to emerge. When in songwriting mode, the late Robin Gibb of the Bee Gees was also quite clear about avoiding any sources of criticism. "The creative process is a very personal thing. One problem is: don't invite anybody to say anything critical when you are developing a song. It is crucial that you don't. If you feel that you are onto something special, that will uniquely come out as something special in the end, the last thing you want is somebody coming in, 'Oh, I don't like that ...' They may be the cleaning lady for instance, but it has a psychological effect."[60]

The question of finding the voice inside you, knowing what it is you want to say and instinctively directing your actions in such a way that gives it its best expression is not easy: you just have to find it; yet in many instances we don't know that we even have a voice. Instead we tend to mimic others that we admire: singing like Elvis Presley, writing songs like Bob Dylan. We never feel that we can actually sing and write like ourselves. On the question of finding your voice, Elvis Costello thought it was just a matter of self-confidence. "I don't believe anybody hasn't got a voice," said the husband of jazz siren Diana Krall. "I just think they haven't found it yet. I believe everybody can write songs in the same way."[61] Five years before his death, Leonard Cohen spoke of his struggle to find a voice, and his struggle to do this is a strong reminder of the circuitous route many of us must take:

Now, you know of my deep association and confraternity with the poet Federico García Lorca. I could say that when I was a young man, an adolescent, and I hungered for a voice, I studied the English poets and I knew their work well, and I copied their styles, but I could not find a voice. It was only when I read, even in translation, the works of Lorca that I understood that there was a voice. It is not that I copied his voice; I would not dare. But he gave me permission to find a voice, to locate a voice - that is to locate a self, a self that is not fixed, a self that struggles for its own existence. As I grew older, I understood that instructions came with this voice. What were these instructions? The instructions were never to lament casually. And if one is to express the great inevitable defeat that awaits us all, it must be done within the strict confines of dignity and beauty.[62]

Cohen's counsel on matters of artistic integrity finds resonance in a tale told recently by saxophonist Clarence Clemons. The rapidly ageing and infirm Clemons, for years one of Bruce Springsteen's top-gun sidesmen, was asked to play some sessions with the new world recording artist Lady Gaga. When he asked her what and how she wanted him to play, he reported that she replied: “Just be Clarence Clemons. Play what you want, be who you are. I'm gonna drop the needle and you go.” Smiling, he recalled: “So that's what I did and she loved it. That was very cool. Something I hadn't experienced in a long time, not since Bruce’s first albums. Sit down and play, just play. It reminded me of why I love being a musician and doing what I do.”[63] Again, I can see Tom Waits nodding his head. And Cézanne? Certainly.

In closing, two anecdotes regarding Neil Young and Bob Dylan are worth recounting. In a recent Memphis concert, while introducing an early favourite of his by Ian Tyson called “Four Strong Winds”, the now statesman-like Young reflected back to the time when he was still a teenager struggling to break free to find that sense of self that would soon convert into the gift to music that he became. Said Young: “When I was just a kid, 16 years or 17 years old, I went to this place near Winnipeg where I grew up, called Falcon Lake. And it's just one of those first times when you get away from home and you're on your own, and I was just kind of feeling it for the first time, and there was this little kind of restaurant place with a juke box that was there. And I used to go there and I think I spent all of my money playing this song, over and over again. It was the most beautiful record that I'd ever heard in my life and I just could not get enough of it.”

If you know a little about Young's parents, their separation, and his troubled teenage years spent drifting from school to school, you can understand why Young was so affected by the lyrics of “Four Strong Winds”; the words exacted the trail of

failed personal connections, the music steeped in a prairie tradition of stark simplicity and elegant motifs that, within 10 years, he would make his own. It was as if Young was discovering a part of himself that he did not yet know existed, an inner, existential, truer self. Indeed, during one of his country turns (as opposed to turning out with Pearl Jam) Young covered "Four Strong Winds" himself on the 1978 album Comes A Time. Close to his death, Johnny Cash did the same on his American V, released posthumously in 2006. In 2005 "Four Strong Winds" would be voted by the listeners of CBC Radio One as the greatest Canadian song of all time.

During the early '50s, in Midwest America, a young Dylan became similarly afflicted by the blues through listening to the late-night radio stations. He recalled times when he would stay up and listen to Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, Jimmy Reed and Howlin' Wolf coming in from the distant East Coast radio station beaming out from Little Rock, Arkansas, Chicago, Illinois and Shreveport in Louisiana. Like Keith Richards, the more he listened to blues songs, the more he spent time trying to figure them out. Soon he began playing them himself. It was all he did; all he could do. Admitted Dylan: "The reason I can stay so single-minded about my music is because it affected me at an early age in a very, very powerful way and it's all that affected me. It's all that ever remained true for me. And I'm very glad this particular music reached me when it did because frankly, if it hadn't I don't know what would have become of me."[64] Later, in New York, when in his early twenties, Dylan first came to hear the vinyl recordings of Robert Johnson from half a century before. It was as if he'd been hit by a bullet. Over the next few weeks, he would listen fixedly to Johnson's vinyl, playing each song, repeatedly, cut after cut. "Whenever l did it felt like a ghost bad come into the room, a fearsome apparition. The songs, were layered with a startling economy of lines. Johnson masked the presence of more than 20 men. I was fixated on every song and wondered how Johnson did it. Songwriting was for him some highly sophisticated business ... Everything was up for transition and I was standing in the gateway. Soon I'd step in heavy loaded, fully alive and revved up. Not quite yet, though."[65]

CHAPTER SUMMARY

1. This chapter provides an overview of the creative process.
2. Economic think-tank founder Brian Arthur suggests that it may be divided into three distinct phases: observation, withdrawal/silence, and inspired action. Through citing the creative processes of a number of great artists, these dynamics are briefly examined.
3. Also considered is the importance of authenticity, and how we might find our uncritical creative voices.

SECTION ONE

Chapter one – The Artistic Sensibility

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