



The Existential Entrepreneur: “Stop Driving! (the Gospel of Mister Jensen)”

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ABSTRACT

This research note explores a possible bridge between entrepreneurship, existentialism, and music through the life of Jesus-Jensen, a fictional character in Vilhelm Moberg’s novel *A Time on Earth* (1963) whom we have musically and lyrically interpreted in the song “Stop Driving (The Gospel of Mister Jensen)”.

KEYWORDS

Existentialism, entrepreneurship, song crafting, music composition, lyrics, literature

We begin our research note by briefly presenting some prevalent aspects of entrepreneurship theory along with a fundamental assumption of existential philosophy. For this purpose we lean on discussions of entrepreneurship as a collective process of organizing and on the existentialist idea that existence is a constant process of creating meaning, both for oneself and for others. From there, we move into the literary context on which the song lyrically and musically builds. Having coalesced these elements of entrepreneurship, existentialism, and Moberg’s novel into a foundation for creating music, we then discuss the writing process in which we engaged to make the song’s music and lyrics. Our ultimate aim with this endeavor has been to use entrepreneurship theory as a means of bridging existentialism, literature, and—by extension—music. To sonically illustrate this bridge, we close by presenting the song as an experience for the reader/listener.

Entrepreneurship and Existentialism

Researchers have long investigated entrepreneurship in its many manifestations, including as a form of creative destruction that drives market dynamics (Schumpeter, 1934), as a collective phenomenon of organization creation (Gartner, 1988), as a process of materializing ideas through opportunity creation (Wickham, 2006) in a social space, and as a collaborative creative act

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(Karami & Read, 2021). As wide-ranging as these strands of entrepreneurship may be, they all center on the basic assumption that humans are beings with the capacity to solve complex problems in innovative ways (Nielsen & Christensen, 2014). Yet another strand of entrepreneurship theory views it as a way of living that changes our everyday practices in the pursuit of subjective and intersubjective meaning, a view in which this research note is anchored. In other words, one can see entrepreneurial phenomena as closely intertwined with existence itself (Weiskopf & Steyaert, 2009). Although this stream of thought remains relatively unexplored, some scholars have attempted to position entrepreneurship as an existential practice (Johannisson, 2011). In joining this pursuit, we seek to illustrate the bridge between entrepreneurship and existential philosophy. To this end, we highlight the process of organizing resources in a meaningful way that, in turn, carries existential overtones such as the constant engagement in creating projects that create meaning for oneself and others. This approach enables the argument that many aspects commonly associated with entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship can also be ascribed to what it means to exist as a human being—in particular what it means to be engaged in the ongoing process of creating life in the broad sense of the word (see: Sartre, 1943/2003; Beauvoir, 1947/2018).

In the existential endeavor of life people materialize ideas and organize everyday life with others as a way of creating meaning in life itself. Existential philosophy rests on the assumption that meaning is not objectively given, but rather subjectively created as a continuous process situated in a social space (Churchill & Reynolds, 2013). Although subjective meaning adheres to the subject (a person), existentialism notably springs from an idea that this subject is situated and immersed in a social context together with others. This important theoretical basis serves to further position existential philosophy as something situated in a social space where meaning is inevitably created intersubjectively, that is, collectively. Here, however, we are not trying to suggest that simply being alive equates with being an entrepreneur, but rather to emphasize that life itself, with all its challenges, problems, and opportunities can be fundamentally understood as a both entrepreneurial and existential endeavor. Discussions about the former endeavor focus on a process of creating value and meaning for others, whereas the latter is articulated as a process of creating one's existence as meaningful. Still, the two theoretical positions share a reliance on the assumption that entrepreneurial phenomena and existential endeavors are situated in a social space together with others.

A Time on Earth

A Time on Earth (Din stund på jorden) (Moberg 1963) is an existential novel that grapples with life's endeavors: regrets, trepidation, the struggle of mundanity, the constant search for meaning. First published in 1963, the novel is regarded as Moberg's most personal and existential work (Liljestrand, 2018). It recounts the story of a Swedish emigrant, Albert Carlson, who, nearing his life's end, reflects on the journey that has brought him there. The people he has encountered on this journey, both those still living and those now dead run like a red thread through his reflections. Carlson spends his days in the small coastal town of Laguna Beach, California. At first glance his life appears to have been a failure: He has two broken marriages, only occasional contact with his two sons, a business venture that has gone bankrupt. Thus, his everyday life now seems to consist of counting his losses, past and present, in life itself and business. His life seems lonely, with his best years forever locked in the past and any hopes for the future diminishing by the day, while his present is draped in the mundanity of a constant struggle to make ends meet. Yet his story holds more than first meets the eye. More characters emerge as the story unfolds. The politically savvy Mrs. Boles always chats with him when he buys his morning newspapers, Mr. Cabrillos

serves him lunch with a hefty side of grandiosity about his own magnificence, and the most successful realtor in Laguna Beach, Mrs. Jeffers, likes to seek out Carlson's advice based on his own career as a real estate agent. Every character plays an important role in Carlson's life, which starts to seem less lonely. Each of these figures could also be viewed through an entrepreneurial/existential lens (c.f. Johannisson, 2011; Taylor, 2019; Zen et al, 2023). They organize their private lives and their professional ventures in direct relation to their own enterprises. From this perspective they live their lives in a dialectical juxtaposition between their creations (their respective enterprises) and the way they live their lives. For example, Mrs. Jeffers appears devoted to her realtor position; she constantly considers how to expand her business or engages with various real estate offices, as well as occasionally meets Carlson for lunch to discuss her business challenges. Although her successful business life appears rather joyful, it is nonetheless immersive in the sense that it completely devours her time her time on earth, which she lives through her business endeavor. In fact, Mrs. Jeffers evince the bridge between entrepreneurship and existentialism through her constant engagement in an organizing process that creates meaning for her. Mr. Cabrillo and Mrs. Boles also create this bridge, living their lives in a seamless immersion of their entrepreneurial ventures and their everyday existence.

A homeless war veteran called Jesus-Jensen is another figure in Carlson's life. Little is known about him other than that he is of Danish descent, has fought in the trenches and battlefields of war, and has been traumatized by those experiences. Rumors have it that he has been hospitalized at a mental asylum up north, yet exactly where and when is unclear. His weather-beaten face, long beard, and uncut hair all testify to a man who has travelled to the depths of hell without ever really coming back. Homeless, he spends his days on the somewhat messianic mission of saving humanity from the death machine of modernity. His ultimate nemesis: the heavy traffic. His message: Stop driving! His self-proclaimed role as a modern-day sidewalk Messiah has earned him the nickname "*Jesus-Jensen*" from Laguna Beach's residents. Every day, between lunch and nightfall, he stands at the corner of Cleo Street and San Pedro Boulevard preaching to the passing traffic: Stop driving! Stop driving! Stop driving! This behavior strikes the outside observer as a bit strange, perhaps even mad, as does the fool's errand that is his mission.

Although Jensen's backstory is sparse, the few details given point to a man ravaged by war but who has mustered the strength to carry on. In this light one can understand him as an existential entrepreneur for three main reasons. First, he draws on his own experience to formulate a problem requiring attention: Many people die in traffic-related accidents. According to Jensen, the Death Machine takes nearly 40,000 souls a year. The merits of the proposed solution withstanding, if he could make people stop driving cars, clearly he might save human lives. Perhaps by saving others he can make his own life count for something; despite all his failures, he could get this one thing right. Second, he uses a dual modus to realize his plan. On the one hand, he relentlessly shouts his message to the world, showing up at the same street corner day in and day out, thus displaying a decisive consistency in his attempts to get his message through. On the other hand, he intends to make a monument that visually represents a mountain of dead bodies in the nearby desert, in this way materializing the statistics in a morbid, yet tangible experience that evokes what 40,000 bodies piled in a pyramid would look like in reality – a far more vivid experience than mere numbers would convey. Third and most importantly, he manages to create meaning in his life in a seemingly mad endeavor. One could, perhaps, objectively corroborate the madness of his pursuit, but subjectively his mission is undoubtedly what keeps him going.

The Process of Bridging Entrepreneurship, Existentialism, and Music

Until this point we have argued that creating music offers an untapped potential to bridge entrepreneurship and existentialism. To demonstrate this potential, we turn to a research project called *Cultural entrepreneurship in the field of music*, that in turn, is one of six research projects that constitutes the research project *Innovative Cultural Entrepreneurship*, funded by the Kamprad Family Foundation. The overarching purpose of this project was to develop cultural and musical life in the province of Småland, Sweden. The idea of making music out of Moberg's *A Time on Earth* originated in this project, with the purpose being to have researchers and practitioners use their combined experiences and competencies to tackle problems prevalent in the regional field of culture and music and thus to come up with possible solutions. The project researchers aimed to devote their time in the field to providing the practitioners with sparring partners that offered their theoretical insights into practical problems, and the practical problems in turn could feed into their theoretical insights (Ericsson and Strandberg, 2025). In other words, a collaboration was to be established based on reciprocity and a continuous oscillation between abstract theory and concrete practice (Schön, 1983).

One participant, however, wished for the researchers to serve not only as sparring partners but also as creative partners that could expand his business network. Initially, the researchers were a bit puzzled, but as time went on, a rather unusual approach began to emerge. What if one of the researchers transcended the researcher role to become a cultural entrepreneur engaged in the interpretative act of writing lyrics based on a novel and, hence, in the creation of a music album? In this scenario the researcher would thus oscillate between being a researcher and a songwriter and a singer. Conversely, the research project participant would then transcend the role of cultural entrepreneur to also become a part of the research process and a writer in the field of research and a music composer of the album in its becoming. A visible manifestation/example of this collaboration lies in this very text, which the researcher and the research project participant have co-authored.

This approach has encompassed more than the bridging of professional identities, we also meaningfully organized our respective competencies in order to attain a concrete result: a music album. Importantly, as part of this organizing process, we constructed a dialogical collaboration that emanated from an intersubjective understanding of i) the soundscape or genre, ii) the characters, themes and sentiments that permeate the novel, and iii) the practical division of labor when working with the album. Next, we present how these three aspects applied to the actual working process of creating the album.

As the book covers a variety of themes, characters, and sentiments, we had to take a broad approach that left the possibility of moving between genres open. We made this decision not in advance but as a consequence of creating songs that interpret how the various characters might sound. For this reason, constant dialogue remained a central aspect in the creative process of individually reading and interpreting the book and then discussing our interpretations from our respective perspectives. From a strictly lyrical perspective, the lyrics needed to be written in a way that at once remained anchored in the novel and incisively captured the characters populating it. On the other hand, the music had to sonically capture the characters through our choice of arrangement, production, and the shape of the song. Constant dialogue was again paramount to our reaching a common understanding of the novel's different passages, the composition of lyrics, and the marriage of lyrics and music. This working method inevitably organized both our lives, personally and professionally, in the immersive process of music creation.

The process of recording “*Stop Driving (the Gospel of Mister Jensen)*” played out as follows. First, we recorded a musical background with a full set of instruments (here, guitar, bass, piano, drums). We recorded the initial vocals with a nonsense, yet meaningful text in the sense that a balanced number of syllables outlined the lyrical framework for the upcoming text. We then wrote lyrics rooted in the novel to portray Mr. Jensen musically and lyrically. In completing these first two steps, we had made a demo, short for demonstration, whose contrasts and song give the listener a feel for the text, melody, and arrangement. A demo allows the music producer to discover other song elements perhaps needed to perfect a song’s sound, but it also allows the lyricist to hear where words might be omitted or replaced with different-sounding words that better fit the melody and the story.

Creating “Stop Driving! (the Gospel of Mister Jensen)”

The storyline

The lyrics originate in the message Jensen cries out to the world, “*Stop driving!*” which is a sentence that lends itself to the chorus. Our overarching aim in composing the lyrics was to introduce Jensen as a three-dimensional figure and to give the listener, or the reader of the lyrics, a sense of Jensen’s past and present life as well as the messianic quest on which he has embarked. The first verse situates Jensen in the geographic setting Moberg describes, and the second verse strives to deepen the character. We found it profoundly important to capture the gestalt of Jesus-Jensen, noting that Moberg wrote of Albert Carlson as having a respectful, reasonable relationship with Jensen and showing him a care that countered the locals’ conception of Jensen as a madman. This tone of care and respect led us to see Jensen through Moberg’s eyes rather than as a mere lunatic, village idiot, or city-sidewalk original. To emphasize this perception, we dignified Jensen with the title “*Mister*”.

Our understanding of Jensen’s life, the sounds of traffic, and the constant beat of the city’s pulse inspired the musical composition. The tempo is slow without becoming sluggish. A guitar-based riff introduces the song, pointing the musical direction towards a meeting between classic soul and modern blues. The organ and Rhodes piano add sonic ornaments that resemble the noise of traffic and a city in motion. Underscoring the sense of motion, the drumbeat carries the song forward, while the bass melody adds a groovy ambience/flavor to the song. As such, the instruments are a means to an end, helping to construct Jensen as a sonic composition with a soundscape intended to tell the musical story of a broken man’s life in a modern city. Jensen’s highs and lows also come to the fore through the choices made for the song’s overall composition, which is structured as follows: intro – verse – bridge – chorus – interlude – verse – bridge – chorus – interlude – solo – chorus. We integrated the verses, whose lyrics are intended to depict Jensen’s everyday life and personality, into the song by playing them in A-minor. This approach enabled us to invoke his everyday life and build the song towards the chorus carrying the message of salvation according to Jensen. We used C-major to compose the chorus as this key can get the message across and reinforce Jensen’s voice. The contrast between the verses and choruses was a conscious decision aimed to create a nuanced picture of Jensen as a human being.

We also added a guitar solo to propel the listener into the modern city and its sounds, but also into the possible soundscape of Jensen’s interior world. We used a reverb effect on the guitar to engender the echoes of Jensen’s message on the street and his inner thoughts as he proclaimed it. The solo invites the listener in with a rather straightforward melody that later grows into a more complex composition of rapidly presented notes that ultimately feed into the final chorus.

In sum, “Stop Driving (The Gospel of Mr. Jensen)” arguably results from a process of organizing competencies in a creative collaboration where entrepreneurial aspects coincide with existential assumptions. The process was entrepreneurial insofar as we established it as a context for creating an opportunity. Specifically, we saw an opportunity to develop Småland’s music life by making music composed to appeal to a wider audience and thus to open an avenue to Moberg’s work. From an existential viewpoint, this opportunity was a way to create meaning from a stance aimed to move beyond the absoluteness of what is and instead explore what-could-be.

The lyrics

See that man,
On Cleo Street/
San Pedro Boulevard,
Every day, all year round,
He’s preaching on the street,
No one really bothers,
Or listens to his words.
People call him Jesus around here,
His Gospel echoes loud and clear:

Stop driving now!
Stop driving now!
Mister Jensen wants to save us all,
Listen to his call,
Stop driving now!

The word is that,
He lost his mind,
Far beyond control,
A broken man,
That thinks he can,
Help us, change our ways,
Listen to his message,
And what he has to say.
Right here on the sidewalk,
He is preaching for me

Bridge

Chorus

The Song

See [Strandberg & Trampe, 2025](#).

Closing Comments

In this research note we have argued that entrepreneurship, existential philosophy, and music can be bridged through the creation of something new, in this case through the crafting of a song. The song is essentially a well-organized sonic experience, but the process leading up to its creation has been largely entrepreneurial and existential in its ambition of producing something meaningful for the researcher and practitioner while also creating a product for others to experience (and possibly value as meaningful). In this research note, we have outlined the process behind the song and presented the song itself, thereby completing the bridge between entrepreneurship, existentialism and music - or at least offered it as a possibility. This is where the aim of the research note and its contribution coincide in their call to engage in processes that bridge seemingly unrelated fields through the creation of a meaningful product.

While entrepreneurship opens an avenue for interpreting and seeing the world, existentialism offers the opportunity to see the world for what it could be and not necessarily for what it is. This combination of entrepreneurship theory and existential philosophy has proven to be a practical tool for unlocking creativity, especially because it satisfied the prerequisites for being creative, and thus in a sense a creative tool for making something new for oneself and others. In this project creativity was not an isolated individual process, but rather a collective effort to combine the experiences and competencies of a researcher and a practitioner by transcending their respective roles. One could say this creativity was achieved democratically, as the researcher and the practitioner established a collaboration based not on hierarchy but on equality.

One could view a closing comment that reflects the act of combining seemingly unrelated fields of research (entrepreneurship, existential philosophy, and music) as a creative act that resonates with a number of entrepreneurship's key aspects. For example, the recognition that combining the fields of entrepreneurship, existentialism, and music with the idea that this act could lead to the creation a song developed not through a necessity-driven logic, but rather as an (inter)subjectively constructed opportunity. From an existential perspective, being (the song in this case) can be created out of nothingness (the idea that anything can be created) when field-established roles are transcended and mutual respect, playfulness and joy characterize the creative process. One could argue that the idea and act of doing research this way, that is, of creating a music album as an outcome of a research project in business administration, is a way of breaking with the normative, taken-for-granted assumptions for how research should be done and instead wondering how research could be done (Ericsson & Vasko, 2024).

Enjoy the listening!

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