Existential Songs Full results

Supplementary material for Mick Cooper's Existential psychotherapy and counselling: Contributions to a pluralistic practice (Sage, 2015), Appendix.

One of the great strengths of existential philosophy is that it stretches far beyond psychotherapy and counselling; into art, literature and many other forms of popular culture. This means that there are many – including films, novels and songs that convey the key messages of existentialism. These may be useful for trainees of existential therapy, and also as recommendations for clients to deepen an understanding of this way of seeing the world.

In order to identify the most helpful resources, an online survey was conducted in the summer of 2014 to identify the key existential films, books and novels. Invites were sent out via email to existential training institutes and societies, and through social media. Participants were invited to nominate up to three of each art media that 'most strongly communicate the core messages of existentialism'.

In total, 119 people took part in the survey (i.e., gave one or more response). Approximately half were female (n = 57) and half were male (n = 56), with one of other gender. The average age was 47 years old (range 26–89). The participants were primarily distributed across the UK (n = 37), continental Europe (n = 34), North America (n = 24), Australia (n = 15) and Asia (n = 6). Around 90% of the respondents were either qualified therapists (n = 78) or in training (n = 26). Of these, around two-thirds (n = 69) considered themselves existential therapists, and one third (n = 32) did not.

There were 235 nominations for the key existential song, with enormous variation across the different respondents. In terms of artists, the most commonly nominated were (in descending order): Bob Dylan, Pink Floyd, The Beatles, Leonard Cohen, Talking Heads, David Bowie, Bruce Springsteen, John Lennon, Radiohead, and Simon and Garfunkel.

The following table gives the songs that were nominated by the respondents, in order of how frequently they were nominated and then by artist. Comments from participants are also given for each track. Where participants gave similar comments for more than one song, the comments are only presented with the first song.

Very many thanks to everyone who participated in this survey.

To listen to a playlist of all these songs on YouTube, search 'Existential songlist'.

Title (frequency)	Artist	Comments
Once In A Lifetime (4)	Talking Heads	
Somewhere Over The Rainbow (3)	Izzy/Eva Cassidy/Jeff Beck	
Imagine (3)	John Lennon	A generation's mass conscious, hope and vision of a world of unity and peace (conceived in contrast to meaningless war).
Another Brick In The Wall (3)	Pink Floyd	The Wall is more than a song, but an entire concept conveying the existential through the lifespan.
Time (3)	Pink Floyd	Time - a powerful statement about the fleetingness of life.
Blowin' In The Wind (2)	Bob Dylan	The sense of the cosmic, the enigmatic, and the call for a vital responsebeyond the canned and the programatic, to great human predicaments.
Like A Rolling Stone (2)	Bob Dylan	
Darkness on the Edge of Town (2)	Bruce Springsteen	About trying to create meaning and survive in the face of despair.
My Way (2)	Frank Sinatra	
Mad World (2)	Gary Jules	
Anthem (2)	Leonard Cohen	Seems to really capture something of the existential in the line "There is a crack, a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in". It shows that an authentic life is not one of perfection and superficial beauty. It is through pain and vulnerability that the real is shown.
Hallelujah (2)	Leonard Cohen	Links to the futility of life and addiction.
Is That All There Is? (2)	Peggy Lee	Excellent artistic portrayal of disillusionment with life.
Black and Gold (2)	Sam Sparro	
A Day in the Life (2)	The Beatles	
Turn! Turn! (2)	The Byrds	
Electric Pow Wow Drum	A Tribe Called Red	
A Have A Dream	ABBA	This song text shows us that failing is part of life, even when we feel life is precious, and we have the possibility of using our resources to cope with this.
Brown Paper Bag	Alison Goldfrapp	
Back To Black	Amy Winehouse	
Hey	Andreas Bourani	Wonderful lyrics (in German) that express how a close friend tries to support a person who fell into a depression. Its plain music supports this message.
Hope There's Someone	Antony and the Johnsons	
Alice's Restaurant	Arlo Guthrie	Contrasts the horrors of how humans construct our collective lives (the American war effort in Vietnam in this particular case) with what is more personal and meaningful. It's also witty.
Galadriel	Barclay James Harvest	

The State That I Am In	Belle and Sebastian	
God Bless The Child	Billie Holiday	The uncertainty of life and the nearness of death are strongly present.
Bad Timing	Blue Rodeo	
Desolation Row	Bob Dylan	
It's All Over Now Baby Blue	Bob Dylan	
Its Alright Ma, (I'm Only Bleeding)	Bob Dylan	
It's Too Late	Bob Dylan	
Let Me Die In My Footsteps	Bob Dylan	
Mr Tamborine Man	Bob Dylan	
Señor	Bob Dylan	Where are we going in such a hurry and with whom?!
The Lonesome Death Of Hattie Carroll	Bob Dylan	
Three Little Birds	Bob Marley	
Against The Wind	Bob Seger	Going against the tide but keeping sailing, so to speak.
Serebro Gospoda Mojego	Boris Grebenshchikov	
Growing Up	Bruce Springsteen	
Lost In The Flood	Bruce Springsteen	The here and now despairing experience of life on the streets.
New York City Serenade	Bruce Springsteen	
What Kind Of Woman Is This	Buddy Guy	
Existence	Bugge Wesseltoft	An instrumental level of some of my very feelings about existence.
Dirty Boy	Cardiacs	I listen and I feel like I can see angels as my soul ascends toward heaven in the glory of light! Ironically, the angels are carrying weapons.
Is This The Life	Cardiacs	My favourite song ever, ever, ever. It makes me weep with joy. I feel strong when I hear it, like I can fly!
Coming Around Again	Carly Simon	
If You Leave Me Now	Chicago	
Don't Panic	Coldplay	
The End Of The Summer	Dar Williams	
Five Years	David Bowie	
Heroes	David Bowie	
Join The Gang	David Bowie	
Space Oddity	David Bowie	Space Oddity deals with our fascination with technology and how it has resulted in a cosmic lostness and

		alienation from home, as characterized by Heidegger and Eric Fromm.
Wild Is The Wind	David Bowie	Love.
On An Island	David Gilmore	
Orpheus	David Sylvian	
What Sarah Said	Death Cab for Cutie	
Crossroads	Don McClean	
Vincent	Don McLean	
Riders on the Storm	Doors	
We're Only Science	Dot Allison	
I Love To Watch A Woman Dance	Eagles	
Je Ne Regret Rien	Edith Piaf	
Between The Bars	Elliot Smith	
Going Nowhere	Elliot Smith	
Letter to mother	Esenin	
I Wanna Know What Love Is	Foreigner	
You Are What You Is	Frank Zappa	
Mad Man Moon	Genesis	
Le Temps De Vivre	Georges Moustaki	
My Freedom	Georges Moustaki	
My Dear Someone	Gillian Welch	
Wichita Lineman	Glen Campbell	
Falling slowly	Glen Hansard	
Utopia	Goldfrapp	
If I Could Read Your Mind	Gordon Lightfoot	Many existential themes about relationships, genuineness, honesty, loss, and distortion.
Eyes Wide Open	Gotye	A Heideggerian song if ever there was one: 'We walk the plank with our eyes wide open'.
In My Hour Of Darkness	Gram Parsons	His own epitaph.
Eyes of the World	Grateful Dead	Sometimes we live no particular way, but our own.
Songs On The Death Of Children	Gustav Mahler	How to cope with death.
MaMuse	Halleluja	Provides an exquisite musical mantra (in folk/gospel genre) for transcending and making meaning of struggle.

Midnight Radio	Hedwig and the Angry Itch	
Drive	Incubus	
Closer To Fine	Indigo Girls	
Love's Recovery	Indigo Girls	About how, in our relationships, we have expectations and visions of what love should be, and as soon as the going gets tough, we tend to abandon each other for our fantasies, not quite realizing that life unfolds and hands us lessons that do not always fit our plans and that part of the challenge is to learn to adapt and learn, and hopefully accept, just as we much accept that life will not meet our expectations but may give us the unexpected gifts, that perhaps the same is true of our loves.
When My Morning Comes Around	Iris DeMent	
Doctor My Eyes	Jackson Browne	About illusions, what is real versus false, and about having the courage to try and look at things as they areand the pain it cause, as well as the possible numbing out as a result of seeing too muchor perhaps that by trying to create barriers to the pain, we do not see.
Running On Empty	Jackson Browne	Where are we going in such a hurry and with whom?!
Grace	Jeff Buckley	All songs have death or meaninglessness themes and under the bridge has its links to the futility of life and addiction.
I Am What I Am	Jerry Lee Lewis	I am what I am, not what they want me to be!
Castles Made Of Sand	Jimi Hendrix	
God	John Lennon	
Hurt	Johnny Cash	
Redemption	Johnny Cash	
All I Want	Joni Mitchell	
Cactus Tree	Joni Mitchell	
Circle Game	Joni Mitchell	
Atmosphere	Joy Division	
Love Will Tear Us Apart	Joy Division	
Moments Of Pleasure	Kate Bush	
Somewhere In Between	Kate Bush	
Bird On A Wire	Leonard Cohen	
The Stranger	Leonard Cohen	
Talking To Myself	Let's Active	
Fuck you	Lilly Allen	Lilly Allen's songs move beyond the usual fare of modern song writing (love, love, love) and to a degree engage with serious issues (I say degree as they are still subject to the vagaries of the 'pop' industry). Lilly Allen often expresses the difficulties of authentic living, it is clear that being 'oneself' is resisted by others (see the content of 'Hard out here'. See also some of the press and public reaction to her as a

		person). She illuminates the very real nature of the herd that tries to curtail her, women, all of us and bring her/us back to the fold. In 'Fuck you' Lilly plays with 'inappropriate language' in a sweet and innocent 'hyper-girls' tone when challenging racism and homophobia. In this way I think these songs are privileging authentic living, a coherent and respectful relational ethic and challenging the mindlessness of the herd even if that comes at a cost.
Hard Out Here	Lilly Allen	(see above)
Lightning Crashes	Live	Connects with our Being and the glimpses we get of the truth of life behind the illusion.
Perfect Day	Lou Reed	
September Song	Lou Reed	
Take A Walk On The Wild Side	Lou Reed	Describes people who live outside the norm and design and create a world outside the norm where they feel human and worthy, loved and therefore alive.
Freebird	Lynyrd Skynyrd	Speaks to connecting with our Being and the glimpses we get of the truth of life behind the illusion.
Faster	Manic Street Preachers	
Death's Diary	Marc Almond	
Reflections of my Life	Marmalade	
What's Going On	Marvin Gaye	
The Living Years	Mike & The Mechanics	
Crossroads	Mind in a Box	
Mannish Boy	Muddy Waters	A political song hidden within a sexual blues classic (I am man, not a boy!).
New Born	Muse	Reawakening my existential self, precipitated early mid-life crisis.
The Thrasher	Neil Young	
Red Right Hand	Nick Cave	
To Be By Your Side	Nick Cave	
A Place To Be	Nick Drake	A melancholic reflection on our attunement to existence.
Feeling Good	Nina Simone	
Who Knows Where The Time Goes	Nina Simone	
Ain't Got NoI've Got Life	Nina Simone	
All Apologies	Nirvana	
Cake	Opera Singer	
Alive	pearl jam	
We Shall Overcome	Pete Seeger	

Pleasures Of The Harbour	Phil Ochs	
Comfortably Numb	Pink Floyd	Speaks to connecting with our Being and the glimpses we get of the truth of life behind the illusion.
Us And Them	Pink Floyd	Describes the experience of going round and round in circles aimlessly.
Wish You Were Here	Pink Floyd	Love this lyric: 'running over the same old ground, what have we found, the same old fears.'
In Heaven	Pixies	
When I Am Laid In Earth	Purcell	
Bohemian Rhapsody	Queen	
Creep	Radiohead	
Exit Music	Radiohead	
Imagine Dragons	Radiohead	
Just (You Do It Yourself)	Radiohead	
Empty	Ray Lamontagne	The anguish of loneliness.
Under The Bridge	Red Hot Chili Peppers	
Everybody Hurts	REM	The human condition of dealing with loneliness, detachment and suicide is the central focus of this song.
Losing My Religion	REM	
More Than This	Roxy Music	Balances a sense of meaninglessness with the potential to create meaning, and has a realistic, casual attitude to the idea of human growth ("maybe I'm learning", "hopefully learning").
Hemispheres	Rush	Deals with the need for a repair of the Cartesian schism.
Éden	Sarah Brightman	Evoke the spiritual dimension of life.
On Your Own Again	Scott Walker	
Breathe Me	Sia	I am drawn to music filled with angst, a core principle of existentialism. It connects with me in a way that allows physical embodiment of fear, pain, and responsibility. It is a communication of the overwhelming nature of free will.
Bridge Over Troubled Waters	Simon and Garfunkel	The importance of relating in difficult times.
Flowers Never Bend In The Rainfall	Simon and Garfunkel	
I Am A Rock	Simon and Garfunkel	
Kathy's Song	Simon and Garfunkel	Describes a loss of meaning and identity ("I have come to doubt all that I once held as true") and a view of life as only struggle and death ("as I watch the drops of rain weave their weary paths and dieI know that I am like the rain") but ends with a sense of hope and redemption through connection ("the only truth I know is you") and a recasting of human love as a good enough substitute for deity ("there but for the grace of you go I").
The Boxer	Simon and Garfunkel	
Le Vent Nous Portera	Sophie Hunger	

Black Hole Sun	Soundgarden	
Cabinet	Spratleys Japs	An instrumental, drifting, building 10 minute electronic masterpiece based around the sound of a single chime that builds and builds until I am literally crying with existential sensation it nearly breaks me.
Drive Home	Steven Wilson	, , ,
Land Slide By	Stevie Nicks	I feel deeply when I hear this song.
Fields of Gold	Sting	Beautiful.
Fields Of The Nephilim	Sumerland	
Psycho Killer	Talking Heads	
Road To Nowhere	Talking Heads	
Golden Slumbers	The Beatles	
When I'm Sixty-Four	The Beatles	
Yesterday	The Beatles	
From A Late Night Train	The Blue Nile	
Strange Days	The Doors	
Make Your Own Kind Of Music	The Mamas and The Papas	
Where is my mind?	The Pixies	
Message In A Bottle	The Police	A song about how we are all together searching, thinking we will find an answer, and what we discover is that everyone else is also searching together, and that it is just this one, great big, massively collective search.
Ruby Tuesday	The Rolling Stones	About a woman who takes her life in her hands in order to live an authentic existence.
How Soon Is Now	The Smiths	Existential despair.
I Want The One I Can't Have	The Smiths	
There is a Light That Never Goes Out	The Smiths	Deals beautifully with the human need to believe in something permanent versus the knowledge that everyone dies, as well as the struggle between living fully and fearlessly (presented as a solution to mortality) and the fear of rejection "but then a strange fear gripped me, and I just couldn't ask".
Bittersweet Symphony	The Verve	
History	The Verve	
Song To The Siren	Tim Buckley	
Next To Normal	Tom Kitt, Brian Yorkey	Not just a song but a whole play about a mother struggling with the loss of her son, suffering from bipolar disorder and the various treatments coming with it, and trying to stay on top of her family. Her husband in denial, deeply depressed himself, her daughter seeking her attention by being perfect (or not). Subtly observed and and gloriously transported into music.
Fast Car	Tracy Chapman	

One	U2	
Poema Dos Olhos da Amada	Vinicius de Moraes	
Pesnya O Druge	Vladimir Vysockij	Dialogue.
Ravenous Medicine	VoiVod	Deals with the objectification of the human body, alienation from the lived body.
MacArthur Park	Waylon Jennings	
You Raise Me Up	Westlife	
Must Do Something About It	Wings	The words say something familiar to me.
Complicated Game	XTC	
The Loving	XTC	
Love Will Find A Way	Yes	