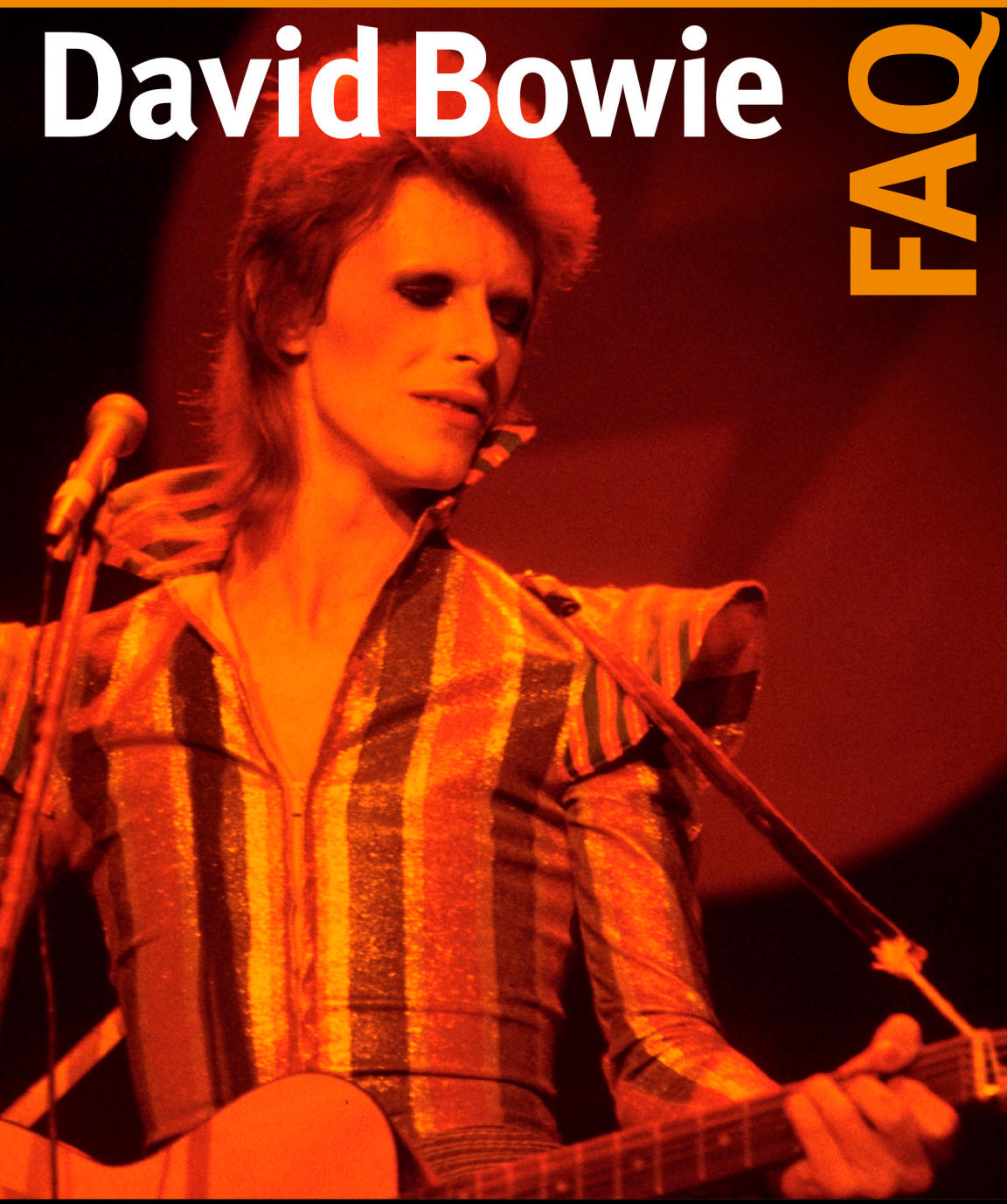
David Bowie FAQ



All That's Left to Know About Rock's Finest Actor

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For Ben, Mia, and Arlo

Contents

Foreword

When I was sitting in the dressing room at the Rainbow Theatre on the night of August 30, 1972, waiting to go onstage with the Spiders from Mars starring David Bowie, I could hardly imagine then that I would be asked to write a foreword for the book that Ian Chapman was producing in 2020!

I joined the Spiders as a last-minute substitute when the previous keyboard player was struck down with an illness two days before the performance. Indeed, when I got the phone call from Mr. Bowie, I hung up on him, thinking it was a pal hoaxing me!

It was my first professional gig, and boy was I nervous. I mean, to appear onstage with an artist who was riding high with a hit single ("Starman"), his concert was a sellout, and I was driving a bread van only two days before. Would you believe it?

But in the Dorchester Hotel on London's Park Lane before the gig, David (and the other members of the Spiders) put me entirely at ease and dispelled all my qualms.

Robin Lumley performing "Starman" with David Bowie on the BBC TV show *Top of the Pops*, July 6, 1972 *Author's collection*

David Bowie was indeed a gentleman in every sense of the word—quiet, polite, and with a wry sense of humor. He made me feel that I *belonged*! As time went by, I realized that this was no mere show on his part. He really *was* like that.

And as for his music, when I got to grips with the chord charts, I discovered very quickly that the construction of his songs was very complex and original. Sure, they might appear simple to a radio listener, but, in fact, they were far from it. Have you ever cast an audio eye across "Changes" or "Life on Mars," for example?

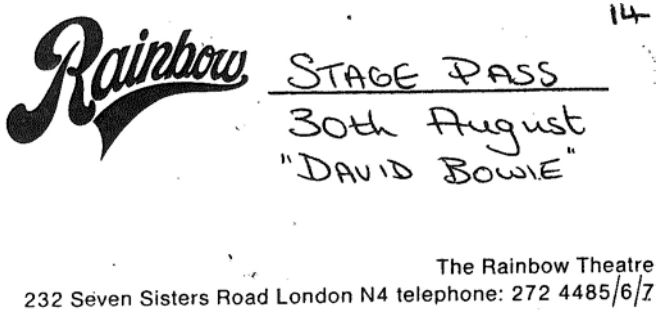
I can quite see how the author of this book has become a staunch Bowie fan over the years, and this is the second tome he has written on this superb artist. As for the "frequently asked questions" implied in the title, I trust that many of them will be answered as you read through *David Bowie FAQ*. The facts will "out," as they say, and you, as a Bowie aficionado, will gain much pleasure from this book.

David Bowie was an actor first and foremost, and any of his accomplishments came second to that. He "played" at being a musician and took the role of superstar as another of his "parts," but always he was an actor. The only thing he didn't "act" was himself. If you'd been as lucky as I was, you would have seen him up close and personal and come to know him. Nevertheless, I cannot claim to have been a close pal and wandered about in awe of his personal magnetism. But I can absolutely attest to his talents and warmth of character.

I cast my mind back to the pre-gig dressing room with the obligatory Campari and Soda (David's favorite tipple at the time) enjoyed by all the Spiders and ruefully muse on the fact that nearly all of us from 1972 are gone. So Ian Chapman's choice of a "foreword writer" was a bit limited! I am delighted to have been asked.

—Robin Lumley

Robin Lumley, keyboard player for David Bowie's Spiders from Mars in 1972 and subsequently Brand X and many other well-known acts and artists.



Robin Lumley's Musician Stage Pass for Rainbow Theatre, August 30, 1972 *Robin Lumley Collection*

Introduction

When David Bowie passed away on January 10, 2016, it took almost the entire world by surprise. Shock waves reverberated across countries and continents. His death was announced on his official Facebook page with the following short message: "Jan. 10, 2016—David Bowie died peacefully today surrounded by his family after a courageous 18-month battle with cancer. While many of you will share in this loss, we ask that you respect the family's privacy during their time of grief."

Throughout his entire career, David Bowie was the master of detail and maestro of outward appearances and remained ever mindful of the separation between personal and public lives. He stage-managed all of his affairs superbly, right up until the last. Nobody has exited this mortal coil with more class and dignity than David Bowie did, the most interesting, intelligent, uber-cool, and always surprising rock star the world has ever seen. But, of course, and as this book hopes to demonstrate, he was far more than just a rock star.

As more and more facts became available in the days and weeks following his death, it became clear that nobody outside his small inner circle of family, closest friends, and a handful of musical collaborators ever knew that he had liver cancer—diagnosed in mid-2014—and, reportedly, even David Bowie himself did not know that the end was imminent until just a few months before he passed away. When his passing did occur, just two days after the release of his final album, the typically groundbreaking *Blackstar*, the world witnessed an outpouring of grief, love, admiration, and loss that went far beyond anything normally seen on the passing of a popular entertainer or celebrity. Tributes containing universally effusive praise flowed throughout all forms of traditional media, and social media platforms such as Facebook turned into the digital equivalent of a global fan tribute wall festooned with poignant and heartfelt messages. The reason for such unprecedented adoration? Simply, while David Bowie was indeed a popular entertainer and celebrity—one of the biggest—he was also far more than that. His intelligence, his artistic depth, and his influence across a broad range of disciplines marked him as an artist without precedent. Even more than *that*, through his enormous body of work, he influenced and impacted positively on generations of people, helping them make sense of the world in which they lived and thereby making their lives better in the process. Such a thing should be, of course, the ultimate and overriding role/aim of both art and artists. That a skinny, pale young Englishman

could achieve such a thing on such an enormous global scale, rewriting as he did so the rule book for what artists could and couldn't be and do, is more than just remarkable. It was astounding. When he died, the world showed its understanding of that fact in its reaction.

When a pop-cultural icon dies, be he or she a rock star or a movie actor or any other kind of widely admired celebrity and/or artist, there is frequently a blaze of attendant public attention that soon fades away once the news of his or her demise becomes old. "Today's news is tomorrow's fish and chip wrapper," as the old English saying goes. This is not the case with David Bowie, who is today, four years after his death, as popular as ever. As a university music lecturer, I can report with confidence that each year's intake of new students at my university, whose ages sit mostly in the seventeen- to twenty-year range, has an awareness of David Bowie that is far and above that of almost all of the artists with whom he rubbed shoulders during his 1970s and 1980s heyday. This is no accident. David Bowie quite simply had more to offer, and his legacy burns more potently and brightly than most as a result.

Speaking personally for a moment, the first I heard of David Bowie's death was a text I received out of the blue from my niece, Tahlia. I still have it on my phone: "Have you heard? David Bowie died!" My initial response was, quite simply, disbelief. I texted her back with a message to the effect that it was almost certainly just a rumor—maybe a publicity/media beat-up timed to coincide with the release of *Blackstar*. The timing, coupled with a complete lack of prior news about any illness, made it very easy to disbelieve and dismiss like that. However, within minutes of Tahlia's text, I found myself fielding other calls, texts, and e-mails from friends, family, fellow fans, and media. A quick check on the Internet, and I quickly knew it was all too true. What a bombshell! The world I had lived in had always had David Bowie in it. But now it didn't.

Who and what was David Bowie? How did he become so good at what he did? What drove him continually to push himself and to change the nature of his work so often? Has anyone ever changed as much as David Bowie did? Who else could have come up with the sublime comedic novelty of "The Laughing Gnome" one minute, superbly summed up the Cold War space race the next with the saga of Major Tom, reinvented himself as the glittering alien androgyne Ziggy Stardust and conquered the United Kingdom in the process (the fake star becoming a real star and thereby providing us with the all-too-rare phenomenon of life following art), morphed into the best white Brit facsimile of a Philly Soul Man one could ever imagine when conquering the United States as a Young American, reemerging as the cool, distant, austere Thin White Duke, and then, just a year later, expressing every teenager's deepest and darkest alienation in the never-leave-your-room ambient electronic perfection of *Low*? And all this within the first decade of his career! Above all, how did David Bowie make such an enormous impact on so many people throughout the world

and on the art forms in which he chose to work? Through the three sections of investigation presented in this book—"The Works," "The Man," and "The Legacy"—*David Bowie FAQ* seeks to address such questions.

I make no pretense at any stage during this book that I am anything other than an avid, dedicated fan. Some of my friends have used terms such as *fanatical* and *obsessed* with regard to my interest in and passion for David Bowie over the years. "You're writing about him *again*?," a couple of them said when I told them I was embarking on *David Bowie FAQ*. "Yes," I replied. By day, as mentioned above, I give lectures about all sorts of aspects of music in my job as an academic within a university performing arts school. But there is nothing academic about how I regard David Bowie. The term *academic* infers that one maintains a deliberate measure of distance from one's subject matter, that some kind of studied aloofness and/or lack of passion and emotion exists, that some kind of cool appraisal is in the offing. Such notions are about as far away as one could get from my actual true feelings toward David Bowie. Now sixty years old, I cannot imagine not having had David Bowie in my life ever since 1972, when I was age twelve. As a fan of forty-eight years, I don't pretend to have intimate biographical knowledge of every aspect of the man's life and work; nobody could. And it's a pity, perhaps, that he never felt motivated to write his autobiography. With all of this said, however, I do know a few people who would certainly do rather well on any David Bowie Mastermind-type quiz, and there are several biographies among the myriad books written about the artist that do an admirable job of presenting his life story. No single one of them tells the whole story in itself, but taken together, there is a wealth of information available about his personal and public lives to be devoured by the hungry.

While in no way a biographer, then, I do nevertheless consider myself to be one of David Bowie's most avid fans. I belong to that A-list category of fan who firmly believes that in David Bowie, we had one of those rare and infinitely valuable artists who changed peoples' lives for the better—who taught important lessons to those who needed them and imparted universal truths, ultimately helping many of us make sense of the troublesome and at times threatening world in which we lived. Discerning this impact is the primary focus of this book.

David Bowie wasn't just a "pop star" who made catchy music to hum or tap along to. Well, he was that as well, and if there are people for whom that is as far as it goes, then that's fine too. But his real point of difference was that he operated on multiple levels. His messages were layered, and fans could come in on any level and, a bit like in Monopoly, pass GO and then proceed more deeply into what he was all about and what he had to offer. At the deepest of levels, David Bowie provided a blueprint for self-betterment, for self-empowerment, for embracing change rather than fearing it, and—part and parcel of all of this—for never just settling for whatever life has handed to

you. His message was that you could take control of your own life and destiny. Someone once said, if you doubt your powers, then you give power to your doubts. Throughout his career, David Bowie backed himself and dared to be different—at times *very* different. Seemingly unafraid of failure, he would try anything and everything and take the cumulative experience he gained into his next venture. Nothing was ever a waste of time. In this sense, then, David Bowie was as much a motivational teacher as a rock star. But yes, he created some catchy tunes, too, if you come to this book as just a casual fan. For those to whom David Bowie meant far more, however, I hope you find resonances with what is written here about numerous aspects of the man's life and career. My writing is not academic—it could never be so when the subject is someone that I owe so much to and, yes, in a sense, love. Enjoy.

Acknowledgments

Of course, at the very top of the list must be David Bowie. As he did for so many people, he had an enormous positive impact on my life, especially during my teenage years during the 1970s, when he provided a blueprint for the acceptance—even celebration—of difference. What a lifesaver. And what a talent.

Much appreciation for helping me, in your various invaluable ways, to bring this book to fruition: Robin Lumley, Rob Burns, Robert Lecker, Della Vaché, Bernadette Malavarca, and Lisa Marr. Special thanks to Sue Videler and my kids, Ben, Mia, and Arlo, who always amaze me and keep me on my toes.

Part 1

The Works

David Bowie, Songwriter

Pinning Down the Artist's Approach

Despite all of his different performance personas and the purposeful qualities he would affect at times in his singing (the cockney twang of "The Laughing Gnome" or "Little Wonder" being fine examples), David Bowie nevertheless had a very distinctive voice, as all of the best rock performers do. It was a voice that stuck out from the pack and was instantly recognizable as his

Aladdin Sane, 1973 *Author's Collection*

and his alone. However, determining a distinctive songwriting style is a much more difficult task because of his deliberate and highly successful embracing of diversity and change. Putting aside for just a brief moment his collections of experimental and avant-garde compositions, such as *Low*, *Blackstar*, and so on, even when utilizing the long-established and standard songwriter's tool kit of melody, harmony, and rhythm, he was capable of great sophistication, complete simplicity, or absolutely anything in between. While well versed in how a song *should* go according to convention, he was far more inclined than most to go somewhere radically different simply to see what would happen if he did. Running the full gamut from the sheer audacious artistry of "Life on Mars" to the perfunctory perfection of "Rebel Rebel," then, with everything in between, no musical vibe, song form, or even mashup was considered off limits.

The Bowie-esque Twist That Comes from Left Field

When interviewed on the BBC documentary *Five Years* (2013), Rick Wakeman described Bowie's unique and brave compositional unpredictability. Having played the piano so memorably on the *Hunky Dory* album (1971), he used "Life on Mars" as his example and demonstrated Bowie's chord choices for the

Cover of the 1973 UK single "Life on Mars" *Author's Collection*

interviewer while sitting at the piano. He recalled, "It was a challenge in certain areas because of the chord structure. . . . He would lead you down the garden path with quite a bog-standard chord structure and then suddenly go awol. [demonstrates] . . . He throws in a chord that you wouldn't expect. [demonstrates] . . . Only David would do a thing like that!"

The Cut-Up Approach to Lyric Writing

One of Bowie's most effective points of difference in terms of his approach to his songwriting was his periodic employment of what is termed the cut-up technique. Attributed to beat poet William S. Burroughs and utilized famously in his groundbreaking novel *The Naked Lunch* (1959), the cut-up technique involves taking written sentences of prose and quite literally cutting them up and rearranging them in a new order—old-school cutting and pasting long before the home computer age. These newly separated excerpts of preexisting sentences can be rearranged as many times as desired until new meanings, to varying degrees of clarity or obfuscation, come through. Sometimes Bowie would use the rearranged words almost verbatim, sometimes he would tweak them, or sometimes he would not use the resultant wordings at all and would start over again. However, the very act of going through the exercise at times resulted in the stimulation of new ideas for him to work with. As he put it in the BBC documentary *Cracked Actor* (1975), directed by Alan Yentob, the technique was useful for "igniting anything that might be in my imagination."

The cut-up technique was one he would continue to utilize throughout his career. On the 1997 documentary *Inspirations*, directed by Michael Apted and filmed during the creation of the *1. Outside* album in 1995, Bowie can be seen at the keys of a Mac laptop using a digital version of the cut-up technique in an application called the Verbasizer, which he developed with technology guru Ty Roberts. As he explains to the camera, "It'll take the sentence, and I'll divide it up between the columns, and then when I've got, say, three or four or five—sometimes I'll go as much as twenty, twenty-five different sentences going across here, and then I'll set it to randomize. And it'll take those twenty sentences and cut in between them all the time, picking out, choosing different words from different columns and from different rows of sentences. So what you end up with is a real kaleidoscope of meanings and topic and nouns and verbs all sort of slamming into each other."

On *Earthling* (1997), Bowie's drum 'n' bass album, he was able to take the cut-up technique far beyond manipulating only the lyrics. Recording the entire album on digital technology instead of analog technology—a first for Bowie—meant that he could quite literally cut instrumental and vocal tracks at will in the recording studio and reposition them wherever and however he wished to

create loops or even complete song structures. He both relished and utilized this freedom as the album's primary producer, alongside the like-minded Reeves Gabrels and Mark Plati, who were given coproduction credits.

The Geographical Approach

At times, geographical location would be a big player in Bowie's compositional palette. *Young Americans* is sublimely Philadelphia-infused, *Low* and *"Heroes"* do far more than tip their hat to Berlin, and *Reality* rings with multiple resonances of New York. In 2003, Bowie told Bill DeMain, in an article titled "The Sound and Vison of David Bowie" for *Performing Songwriter*, "Wherever I'm writing, that place tends to make itself very known, either in the atmosphere or sound. . . . I think the one thing that goes through *Reality* [2003] is the sense of New York. It feels very 'street.' There's a lot more about being a New Yorker, which indeed I am. The accent may not say that [laughs], but I am. I wrote the songs here, downtown where I live, and it does reflect that."

The Marshalling of the Forces

Bowie was a master at aligning his compositional and instrumental forces appropriately according to the requirement of individual songs, making the instrumentation a part of his thinking during the compositional process rather than an afterthought or something to be worked out after the pen was put down. For example, the beautiful jazz-inflected title track of the *Aladdin Sane* album became compositionally simplistic at the point where Mike Garson's piano solo began, thereby giving the piano maestro the most fundamental and unwavering of musical platforms on which he could improvise in as avant-garde a manner as he (or Bowie) wished. Because the rest of the instruments stayed put, the harmony simply sliding between G and A, and the rhythm remained unwavering, Garson had free rein to take all the musical risks in the world. It would never have worked if his solo had been required to occur over a complex, changing rhythmic and harmonic base.

Situating the Melody for Maximum Effect

How Bowie pitched his melodies was an important part of his songwriting bag of tricks. There is no better example than that of "Five Years," the opening track of *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972). At the beginning, he pitches his melody unchallengingly in the mid-range of

his vocal register, but then as the action in the song progresses—as images are presented line after line of citizens panicking at the news of Earth's impending doom—he moves from being a casual observer looking on at the unfolding events to being swept up in the dire scene and as spooked as everyone else is around him. Accordingly, the melody lifts higher and higher as the song goes on, moving his vocal from the mid-range comfort where it began to the clearly, purposely strained absolute limits of his voice to saturate his lines with pure emotional angst. It is a masterful tactic that paints both the lyrics and the mood of a song and was a feature of Bowie's compositional style throughout his career. Such word painting abounds on the *Ziggy Stardust* album. Bowie admitted to borrowing a trick from the song "Somewhere over the Rainbow" from the movie *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), where a leap of a full octave occurs between the two syllables of "some-where," thus drawing the listener's attention skyward to "over the rainbow." Bowie uses this trick with equally great effect in "Starman." By setting the second syllable of the word an octave higher than the first, the listener is drawn literally skyward to where the starman is "waiting in the sky."

Consider too the cleverness of "Space Oddity," Bowie's career-launching epic tale of the unfortunate Major Tom. Aural painting begins the song, with the music ever so slowly drifting into the listener's consciousness from complete silence just as a spaceship might slip slowly and gracefully into view from out of the endless blackness of space. The transition in Bowie's voice from the calm euphoria that can be heard pre- and postlaunch at the beginning of the song to the panicked, danger-filled commentary at the point where things begin to go wrong is voice acting at its best. Similarly, the contrast between verse and chorus is highly effective in painting the action. The busy verses feature much variation in the melody and words set to faster note values, while the chords change with relative rapidity. At the chorus, however, which is literally launched into the heavens with the upward movement between the two words "for" and "here," the chord changes become sparse, the words are set to longer notes, and the comparative effect is one of floating. Major Tom is not in control; his spaceship is gracefully and slowly turning because control has been lost while Major Tom floats and drifts helplessly. Further, in a song full of drama and pathos, the crucial line "Tell my wife I love her very much" is made to stand out superbly with a complete change of voice timbre, becoming personal, regretful, and sad beyond words.

Eliminating Borders

There is one standout underlying principle that defines David Bowie's songwriting, and it is a distillation of his approach to his entire career. Simply, he loved to mix things up and avoid the restrictions of borders. As he put it to

Bill DeMain in 2003 in one of his most candid appraisals of his approach to composing, "I found that I couldn't easily adopt brand loyalty [laughs], or genre loyalty. I wasn't an R&B artist, and I was this artist or that kind of artist, and I didn't really see the point in trying to be that purist about it. What my true style was is that I loved the idea of putting Little Richard with Jacques Brel, and the Velvet Underground backing them—what would that sound like? [laughs] That for me was really interesting. It really seemed, for me, what I was good at doing. What I enjoyed was being able to hybridise these different kinds of music."

By avoiding blueprints, maps, and exemplars, David Bowie was able to free up his songwriting process enough to allow things to take unexpected twists and turns. His final word on this approach, also taken from the DeMain interview, is, "To allow the accidental to take place is often very good. So I trick myself into things like that. Maybe I'll write out five or six chords, then discipline myself to write something only with those five or six chords involved. So that particular dogma will dictate how the song is going to come out, not me and my sense of emotional self. Of course, I'll cheat as well. If I've got the basis of something really quite good coming out of those five or six chords, then I'll allow myself to restructure it a bit, if I think, well, that could be so much better if it went to F-sharp [laughs], or something like that. But to define the rules, then take it as far as you can go with that little rule, then break it, I find is really a way of breaking writer's blocks as well."

2

"My Brother's Back at Home with His Beatles and His Stones"

David Bowie Destroys the 1960s

Rock's Myth of Authenticity

In the 1960s, the overwhelming prevailing rock ideology was one of absolute, 100 percent authenticity. What a performer delivered to an audience either onstage or on vinyl was purported to be a seamless, truthful, absolutely faithful representation of what he or she truly believed and felt within. Simply, there was to be no division between the performer and the performance; it wasn't supposed to be an act. The notion that megastars such as Jimi Hendrix, Bob Dylan, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and others might incorporate into their work any kind of rock 'n' roll/showbiz/entertainment industry construction or artifice was the complete antithesis of what rock was supposed to be about. Rock was marketed as being the voice of the people, earthy, direct, unmitigated, and, above all, "real." Someone once termed this 1960s rock ideology the blue denim truth, and it's no coincidence that the clothing of the era consisted of natural fabrics: denim, muslin, and cotton, accompanied by long, flowing, unkempt hair that served as a virtual badge or beacon of its owner's apparent oneness with the unadorned, naturalistic world. The use of makeup was minimal and was strictly for women when used at all.

Of this time, Philip Auslander noted in his book *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (1999), "Rock ideology demand[ed] parity between the performer's stage and private personae." In his book *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* (2000), Laurence Senelick has further suggested of this façade of authenticity that "the performers are supposed to write their own material, direct their own shows and play 'themselves,' since it is usually self-defeating to differentiate their onstage personae from their offstage lives. For all the intercession of promoters, roadies and mammoth technological

support such as the recording studio, an illusion is maintained that the musician is spinning it all from within."

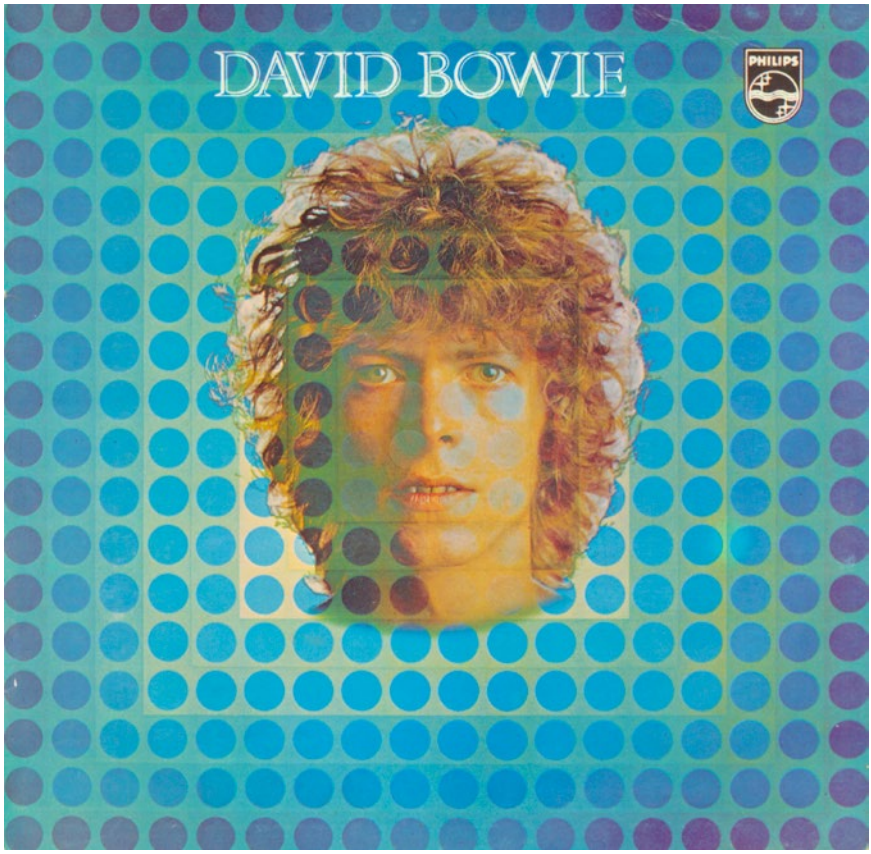
When David Bowie, Alice Cooper, Marc Bolan, and other glam rockers entered the fray as the 1960s whimpered to a close and surrendered to the early 1970s, radical challenges to this prevailing but tired ideology of rock authenticity were about to occur. With their shiny man-made outfits of lurex, sequins, spandex, and polyester; their hair carefully coiffed; their faces masked in makeup; adopted names rather than real ones; and a plethora of stage poses, pouts, and theatricality, it's small wonder the hippies felt mortally threatened. Their ship was about to go down. Or, at least, it was about to list very heavily in the uncharted waters of the 1970s.

The Counterculture's Flagship Sinks

Rock music had been charged with a great responsibility as the flagship of the countercultural generation's hopes and dreams, supposedly epitomized by Woodstock's three days of peace, love, and music in 1969. As an agent for creating awareness of the world's injustices and abominations (for example, the Vietnam War), it had proven through the decade to be a fine rallying point for youth-oriented protest. But could the hugely revered musicians at the forefront of the counterculture actually deliver real change when they were, in reality, just human beings with flaws and defects like everybody else and even more susceptible to downfall because of the sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll distractions and temptations put before them on a plate due to their cosseted status as icons? No. By the end of the decade, many of the idols had become fallen idols, and by the opening years of the 1970s, even the mighty Beatles had dissolved in acrimony. Brian Jones, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and Jim Morrison were all dead. In the final countercultural event of the 1960s, no musician on the bill at the Altamont festival—not the least Mick Jagger—was able to stop the Hells Angels' violence toward the concertgoers that resulted in one death and numerous injuries. Hard on the heels of the Manson murders, things had gone sour indeed for the turn-on, tune-in, dropout generation. But with a new generation of rock fans waiting in the wings—the younger brothers and sisters of the countercultural generation—and a brace of talented new musicians with guitars in their hands and songs in their heads, things were about to be turned upside down.

David Bowie and the New Alternative

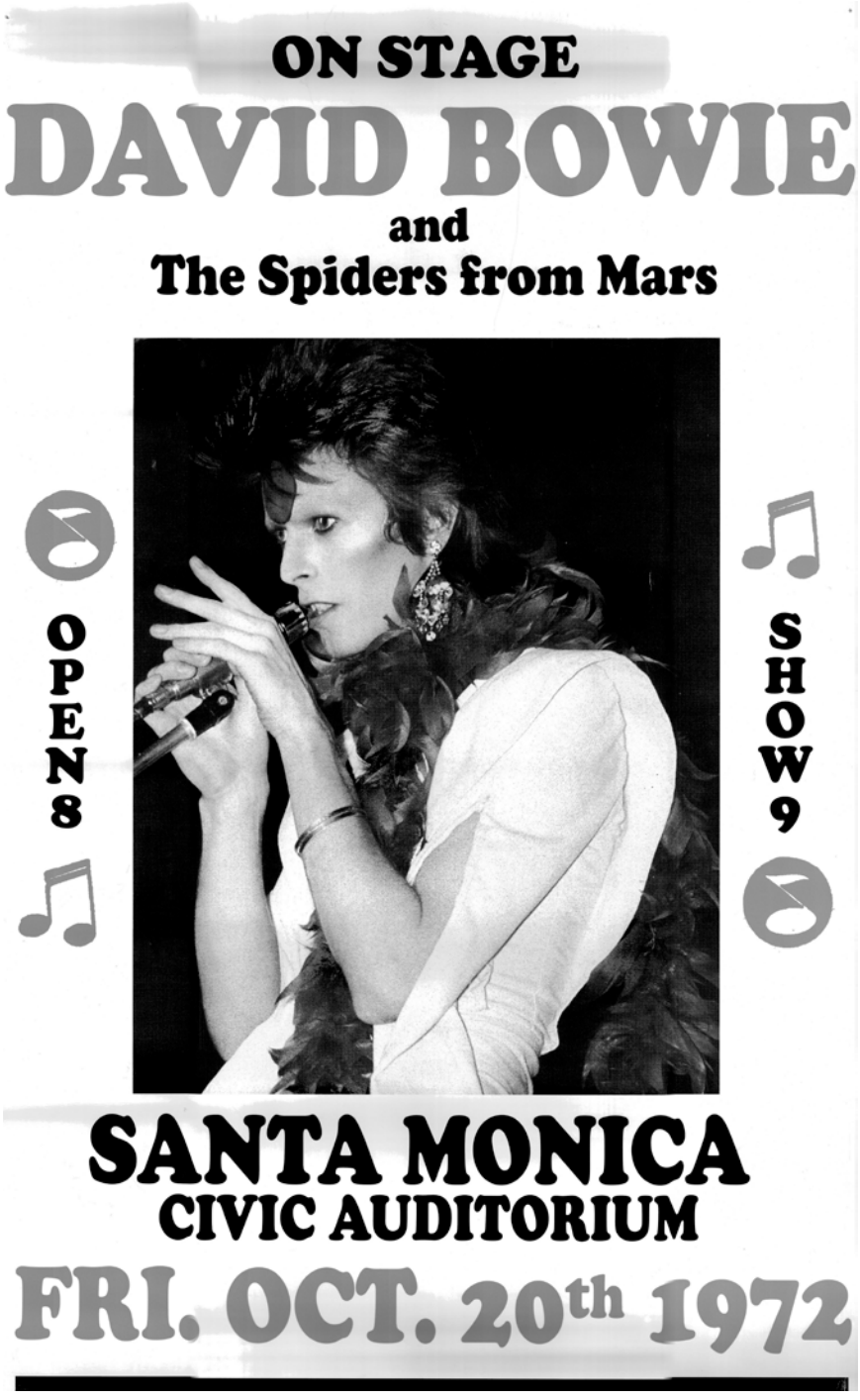
The highly intelligent Bowie, always a keen social and societal observer, set himself up in opposition to the prevailing rock ideology both knowingly and



Bowie's second album, 1969 *Author's Collection*

calculatedly. In Barney Hoskyns's book *Glam: Bowie, Bolan and the Glitter Rock Revolution* (1998), Bowie felt there was no "movement or any unified culture" in rock music of this time "because all that had fragmented by the time the seventies began." He also told *Uncut* magazine in 2003, "You have to try and kill your elders . . . we had to develop a completely new vocabulary . . . [take the] past and restructure it in a way that we felt we had authorship of . . . that was our world, not the bloody hippy thing." Further, Bowie confirmed the success of his strategy in Mark Paytress's book *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1998), emphatically claiming, "I think I wiped out the sixties."

The extent to and manner in which Bowie lampooned the very industry he was working within in the early 1970s was highly offensive to rock purists. He further argued in Paytress's book, "The rock business has become so established, and so much like a society, that I have revolted against it . . . I won't take it seriously and I'll break its rules . . . that's why I felt naturally inclined to take the piss out of it." His method of doing so consisted of offering up the blatantly



Ziggy Stardust 1972 US Tour Poster *Author's Collection*

self-confessed manufactured star figure of Ziggy Stardust—alien, androgynous rock god—for the public scrutiny of the popular music audience and seeking to place his glorious caricature among the "genuine" established stars at the forefront of the popular music scene as if he, or at least Ziggy, were already one of them. Speaking to John Mendelsohn of *Rolling Stone* in April 1971, he famously declared that "rock music should not be questioned, analysed or taken so seriously. I think it should be tarted up, made into a prostitute, a parody of itself. It should be the clown, the Pierrot medium. The music is the mask the message wears—music is the Pierrot and I, the performer, am the message."

Traditionally, the sharpest arrow one could possibly fire at a performer was to accuse him or her of being a fake. What a fine neutralizing strategy, then, to put one's hands up and admit to being a fake—an actor—right from the very beginning. Prior to the full-blown artifice of the career-launching Ziggy Stardust concept and album, in the credits on the back cover of the *Hunky Dory* album (1971), Bowie referred to himself in his coproducer's role as "the actor," thereby showing his hand even before the rest of the world caught on to his revolutionary tactic. Later, at the time of the *Young Americans* album of 1975, he would refer to himself as "the Plastic Soul Man," once again deflecting the inevitable wave of accusations of fakery before they could even begin. Brilliant tactic though it was, some critics persisted, so affronted were they that the foundations of rock, such as traditionalists saw it, could be so decimated. In the United Kingdom's best-selling rock weekly, *New Musical Express*, in 1973, Nick Kent unleashed his venom thus: "David Bowie was last year's Ziggy Stardust, this year's Aladdin Sane and probably next year's Pinocchio. That's showbiz in the Twilight Zone . . . the whole David Bowie mystique will soon be placed and solemnly laid to rest. And all the costume changes and mime poses in the world won't compensate for that, sweetheart."

The Construction of a Star

Bowie's dedication to parodying—and even exploiting—rock stardom is clearly evident in the groundbreaking marketing strategy employed for his 1972 U.S. Ziggy Stardust tour. Built on a foundation of calculated hype, the following excerpt concerning the strategy is taken from a management memo written by his manager Tony Defries and sent out to Bowie's entire entourage: "If we are to remain inaccessible then we must maintain a degree of privacy. . . . People should stay in the hotel provided for them and should be available at all times. . . . Please try and remember that I am feeding, clothing and paying everybody in a style to which they are not accustomed for the one specific purpose called SUCCESS!!! It is important that you pick the right kind of hotel. We prefer

no Howard Johnson/Holiday Inn type. I feel a Royal Coach Inn where possible would be excellent. Something with charm."

This image-above-all strategy, an extremely radical one for the time, proved to be enormously successful. As David Douglas observed in *Presenting David Bowie* (1975), "The only other act to come over as a headliner from England was the Beatles; David Bowie's [tour] was second. By putting Bowie in such company . . . he made Bowie look bigger than he was." Photographer Mick Rock, who accompanied Bowie on his British and American tours, recalled in the *Aladdin Sane* liner notes (rerelease, 2003) another ruse designed to make Bowie look larger than life: "The whole game was theatre. It was, like, David going to America with three bodyguards. When he got to America, yes, there was interest in certain areas, but if you went to the Midwest, you couldn't drag people off the streets to see him. It was part of the theatre to treat him like a star. And there I was; I came very cheap—in fact I came for nothing! DeFries could then start talking about David having an 'exclusive photographer.' People were saying, 'David Bowie's got an exclusive photographer. Who the fuck is David Bowie?' The people reasoned: 'If he's got an exclusive photographer and bodyguards, there must be something going on.' That was a piece of living theatre, if you like, part of the whole thing that Tony and David cooked up between them."

In his article "Space Oddities: Aliens, Futurism and Meaning in Popular Music" (2003), Ken McLeod has suggested that Bowie's "conscious construction of an alien rock star was designed to shed light on the artificiality of rock in general." Bowie highlighted what he saw as artificiality within popular music by presenting to the popular music audience an obviously artificial star figure, one that was so overtly fake that nobody could mistake it for being authentic. In *Strange Fascination* (1999), biographer David Buckley believes that through this strategy, "Bowie drew our attention to the fact that a person could play the part of a rock star before actually becoming one." This is certainly the case, and, as seen in Kevin Cann's *David Bowie: A Chronology* (1983), Bowie retrospectively stated of this scenario, "I wasn't at all surprised Ziggy Stardust made my career. I packaged a totally credible plastic rock star—much better than any sort of Monkees fabrication. My plastic rocker was much more plastic than anybody's." Nowhere was Bowie's playful raison d'être displayed better than in the lyrics of the song "Star" from the *Ziggy Stardust* album (1972) when he sang, "So inviting, so enticing to play the part—I could play the wild mutation as a rock 'n' roll star."

Here Bowie makes it clear that the role of a star is something to be played, much as an actor might play a role in a play. The star is not a real entity but is simply somebody, anybody, portraying that entity. Prerequisite talent aside, the idea that anybody could do this is strengthened as the singer relates how he could "play the wild mutation" or "make a transformation" to being a rock 'n' roll star and, in the process, leave behind the siblings and friends whom he names at the beginning of the song. If the ruse is carried off successfully, the

rewards of fame and money await. This, in a nutshell, is how he destroyed the 1960s rock ideology.

Leaving the 1960s Behind

If the lyrics of "Star" make the tactic implicit, then the lyrics of "All the Young Dudes" most clearly lay out the difference between rock fans from the respective decades: "My brother's back at home with his Beatles and his Stones—We never got it off on that revolution stuff." Rather than presenting the by-now worn-out messages of countercultural unity—of the collective power of the people to make change—Bowie espoused the power of the individual to make change, starting with the remaking of oneself. David Bowie's revolution was new, daring, exciting, sexy, dangerous, confronting, and colorful.