

David Bowie (1947-2016)

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British rock icon David Bowie died January 10, just two days after his 69th birthday and the release of his final album *Blackstar*. Bowie had been diagnosed with liver cancer 18 months before, something the singer chose not to reveal publicly. At the time of his death, he was married to Somali fashion model and actress Iman, whom he wed in 1992.

Among the most influential performers of his generation, Bowie was a talented songwriter with a remarkable ear for pop melodies and hooks. He possessed an unusual but impressive singing voice, which he delivered in his often-imitated posh-cockney accent. He also possessed an obvious flair for the dramatic. That Bowie's work at times suffered from significant limitations (as well as political-ideological disorientation), despite his talents, was bound up with the complex and difficult times in which he lived and developed.

Born David Robert Jones on January 8, 1947 in Brixton, the shape-shifting Bowie was already something of a chameleon prior to his breakthrough in the early 1970s. He had performed in a number of groups and in a wide variety of genres including R&B, folk music and rock. He even tried his hand at musical theater and studied pantomime. This kind of artistic restlessness, and perhaps uncertainty, would remain a current throughout his career.

The 1969 cult hit "Space Oddity," an allegorical tale about an astronaut stranded in space while "ground control" assures him of his popularity on Earth, remains among his most widely heard songs today and was the first of his works to explore two of the central themes of his career—fame and social alienation.

An early album, *Hunky Dory* (1971), featuring the hit singles "Changes" and "Life on Mars," is among his best. The album is a sympathetic, but not uncritical, portrait of youth counterculture, with all its naïveté and confusion, as well as its hopefulness. "Kooks," about

new and decidedly unconventional parents, is among his most enjoyable, sweetest songs.

With his 1972 album *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, Bowie would become a superstar and contributed one of the more significant works of the so-called glam rock era.

The science fiction concept album told the story of Ziggy Stardust, a self-destructive rock star and the Earth-bound prophet for alien beings who comes to bring hope to the world in the last five years of its existence. In performance, Bowie adopted the persona of Ziggy himself, wearing a bright red shag haircut and face paint.

For all the extravagance and excess of the time—the theatricality of glam rock was always more *Star Wars* than *Citizen Kane* — *Ziggy Stardust* is an oddly compelling album. Partly an album about lost kids attracted to rock 'n' roll, it was among Bowie's most successful examinations of fame and hero worship. *Hunky Dory* 's sensitivity toward young people remains as well. "I never thought I'd need so many people," he sang movingly on "Five Years."

Aladdin Sane (1973), *Pin Ups* (1973) and *Diamond Dogs* (1974) would follow in the glam rock style, none quite as successful as *Ziggy Stardust*. "Rebel Rebel" was among the more outstanding singles of the period. "Fame," co-written with John Lennon and guitarist Carlos Alomar from the album *Young Americans* (1975) was among the best of his career and began his exploration of American funk and R&B music.

By the mid-1970s, Bowie had abandoned the Ziggy Stardust character and another persona had emerged, that of the "Thin White Duke." He was a slick, aristocratic type with one foot in the Weimar Republic and another in the rock 'n' roll era. There was something slightly sinister about him.

Most disturbingly, and perhaps surprisingly, Bowie began to flirt with fascist imagery and jargon. In a 1975

interview with *Playboy*, Bowie declared Hitler “one of the first rock stars” and announced that he believed “very strongly in fascism.” Earlier, he told a Swedish journalist, “Britain could benefit from a fascist leader.”

With evident sincerity, he would later apologize for these remarks, calling them “incredibly irresponsible.” In the 1980s and 1990s, he made various anti-racist and anti-fascist statements. Bowie and others blamed the episode on his drug use: “I was out of my mind, totally, completely crazed [on drugs].” There was no doubt some truth to this. Bowie was struggling with a very serious cocaine addiction at the time. There was also his ever-present desire to shock audiences and the press. But that wasn’t the whole truth.

Britain had just undergone a period of intense class conflict, during which the Tory government of Edward Heath declared five separate states of emergency. The Heath government was eventually brought down by the miners’ strike of 1974, which persisted during that year’s general elections called as a referendum on the question, “Who runs Britain, the government or the unions?” There were discussions within ruling circles about whether to stage a military coup to suppress working class militancy.

During this period, a shift to the right was taking place within certain middle class layers, including among artists. As Bowie himself admitted in a 1983 interview with David Thomas for *The Face*, “I almost had an antenna. I mean I did have an antenna. I still do, I think, for the angst of the times, or the zeitgeist ... The atmosphere I feel very strongly, wherever I am. And I felt those things in the air. That whole thing about the Nazi stuff was just prior to the real emergence of the National Front in England, and I just felt it.”

That Bowie could be attracted to such sentiments, however unaware of the implications he may have been, spoke to the growing levels of social indifference and selfishness developing among supposedly “left” middle-class layers.

This disorientation had an effect on Bowie’s art. At his least interesting, his work could be strained and pretentious. One got the sense he was trying to make up for something, to fill in the gaps where he sensed a lack of depth and substance. Elaborate stage shows of the 1970s and 1980s, like the Diamond Dogs Tour of 1974 and the Glass Spider Tour of 1987, typically threw everything but the kitchen sink at audiences.

While his most fanatical admirers may not agree, Bowie was often at his most enjoyable when he wasn’t taking himself so seriously or going out of his way to be “artistic.” He produced solid and danceable pop music throughout the 1980s, those years in which he no longer performed in character, but simply as David Bowie.

“Let’s Dance,” “China Girl,” “Modern Love” and “Never Let Me Down” are not the works on which his reputation rests, but they are well-written and performed pop songs. In many ways they were a breath of fresh air following the “avant-garde” darkness of the musically innovative but fragmented and at times pessimistic Berlin Trilogy (the albums *Low*, *Heroes* and *Lodger*).

While his work was largely uneven in the ensuing years, Bowie remained capable of contributing something significant. His 2013 album *The Next Day* was among the best pop albums released that year, and one of Bowie’s strongest contributions during his later career.

David Bowie was able to connect with a worldwide audience. He touched large numbers of people and their response to his passing has been genuine and moving.



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