

Reflections on David: In a galaxy all of his own

Abstract

This text was written for a special LGBTQI themed edition of the peer reviewed journal *Fashion, Style and Popular Culture*. At short notice, the co-editor asked me to write, and I quote, “a queer focused review of the Bowie exhibition at ACMI.” When I delivered the piece below, it was rejected as not being academic enough!

Apparently they wanted a deconstruction of the exhibition, its layout, construction, themes, lighting, and good and bad points. No mention of LGBTQI+ issues mind you. What the kind of review they wanted has to do with a LGBTQI+ themed issue, I have absolutely no idea. If they had known anything about my writing, they would have known they would not get academic speak, but something a little more interesting. Their loss, our gain.

The text focuses on Bowie's impact on me at the time, as a gay man. Bowie is tight. Singing my all time favourite track of his, *Young Americans*, Bowie is a vocalist like no other. What a voice. Team that with charisma, soul, style, and all the moves ... hands on hips, guitar slung backwards, padded shoulders to die for, cheekbones that you could cut with a knife and a presence that is just luminous. No wonder I loved him as an adolescent, he was my Hero. As someone commented on the YouTube live performance of the song, “ain't there 1 goddam song that can make me breakdown + cry*”

This is a flawed but mesmerising exhibition. Allow three to four hours at least. If you are a Bowie fan it's a 100% must see; and if you are an aficionado of contemporary culture, you will be amazed at the sources Bowie draws from to create his art, his personas. It did no harm, either, that Bowie had access to some of the most creative designers in the world for his costumes and sets, but he was the inventive force. What a man, what an artist, not just a man who felt to earth, but a man who changed the world.

Dr Marcus Bunyan

Keywords

David Bowie, David Bowie is, Reflections on David, Young Americans, Ziggy Stardust, The Man Who Sold the World, Hunky Dory, Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, German Expressionism, Marlene Dietrich, Sonia Delaunay, Metropolis, Hollywood, Japanese film, JG Ballard, queer London, Pan Club, Scandals, Adams, Heaven, Space Oddity, Ashes to Ashes, bricolage, assemblage, Berlin cabaret, Thin White Duke, Australian Centre for the Moving Image

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The year was 1975. In London, six years after that seminal event of early gay liberation, the Stonewall Riots, six years after the landing on the moon, and six years after the release of David Bowie's single, *Space Oddity*, I came out as a gay man age 17. At the time I felt a bit of a space oddity myself, troubled by my hidden identity and the double life I was leading. My first act of rebellion was to walk into a newsagent at Notting Hill Gate underground station, pick up a copy of *Gay Times*, fling the money at the store attendant and run from the place as red as a beetroot. I was so embarrassed.

Things quickly changed. I had been listening to Bowie's music since my early days in boarding school - *The Man Who Sold the World*, *Hunky Dory*, *Ziggy Stardust*, *Aladdin Sane* - and now, after outing myself, I rocked up to the Royal College of Music with silver hair, wearing the most outrageous satin pink and white bomber jacket, with rings on every finger. I walked down St. Albans high street on a Saturday morning through the market in fake white fur coat and eye shadow. It's only now, forty years later, that I realise I was channeling my inner Bowie.

This was the era of Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE) in England, where we had to gather in people's lounge rooms to meet other gay men, or once a month at a disco in country Hertfordshire. Or we went to the *Pan Club* in Luton where drag queens peered imperiously down at us through a grill before they allowed us through the door. The best thing was going to *Scandals* or *Adams* night clubs in London, where we danced on illuminated glass dance floors (like in *Saturday Night Fever*) and wore our army uniforms. We could be whoever we wanted to be. And this was all influenced by the multiple persona of Bowie.

Like an intelligent bower bird, Bowie constructed his different personae through bricolage, building them from cultural signifiers such as German Expressionism, Marlene Dietrich, Sonia Delaunay, Metropolis, Hollywood, Japanese film, JG Ballard and Clockwork Orange, to name just a few. My gay friends and I did much the same. Like Bowie, for us it wasn't so much about sexuality but about androgyny and the public play of gender (although the two are obviously interlinked). We adored David, a self-educated lad from a poor working class family, initially a Mod, who created his own universe of creatures and characters. Glam yes, but so much more than just putting on a costume like *Kiss*, David lived and breathed his worlds and we, his fans, believed in him. Not so much gender bender as cultural gender blender.

Critical to this time in my life was the period that followed *Ziggy: Young Americans* and the Thin White Duke. I got heavily into soul

music, going to a basement nightclub behind Bang on Tottenham Court Road, where they played reggae, Barry White and the Love Unlimited Orchestra... and David Bowie. I used to pretend to be one of the back up singers on the song *Young Americans*: “Young American, young American, she wants the young American.” Bowie is tight. Singing my all time favourite track of his, *Young Americans*, Bowie is a vocalist like no other. What a voice. Team that with charisma, soul, style, and all the moves ... hands on hips, guitar slung backwards, padded shoulders to die for, cheekbones that you could cut with a knife and a presence that is just luminous. No wonder I loved him as an adolescent, he was my Hero. As someone commented on the YouTube live performance of the song, “ain’t there 1 goddam song that can make me breakdown + cry*”. From talking to other gay men, I know that the *Young Americans* album was also critical for them - all cinched waist, high cheekbones, eye shadow, padded shoulders, flaming hair and soul music.

Australian disc jockey Stephen Allkins observed the same phenomena in Sydney. In a recent interview with me he commented,

“My first introduction to the world of David Bowie was in 1975 when I was a 14 year old gay boy hanging out with my gay cousin, coming out unknowingly together. *Young Americans* was so damn funky and classy and totally different to anything that was happening in the white music world at the time. I couldn’t quite get my head around the way Bowie had gone from *Ziggy* and *Aladdin Sane* to the Thin White Duke and funk in one swoop, but I loved it. It’s hard to put into

words how, as everyone else was glamming up, Bowie starting wearing suits and playing with the hottest funk band on the planet. No one else at that time moved or evolved with such speed and ease and he made me believe every look and note. He didn't copy or just follow a trend to get noticed, he created and influenced several generations of people with his music and visual ideas. I say ideas because what he created visually was more than mere fashion, it became art. Looking back on all he's done now, all that he did was art - musically, visually and sensually."

Which leads me on to *David Bowie is*, an exhibition at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) in Melbourne. This is a fascinating but flawed exploration of the life of one of the world's great artists. To see his early life, influences, and upbringing, and to have access to his personal archives - especially the wonderful sketches and storyboards showing his creative process - is invaluable. One of the strongest elements of the performance is how the exhibition links his art to the many cultural signifiers he used to construct it: from collage to construction. The costumes are magnificent including the additional Australian content, like the Pierrot costume from *Ashes to Ashes*. To see artefacts such as the original handwritten stanzas of *Ziggy Stardust* and *Fame* is as close as many of us will get to the source of greatness.

Much less successful was the thematic layout of the exhibition. Sections on film stars, 1930s, and Berlin cabaret (to name but a few), in non-chronological order, made it difficult to comprehend the

development of each character and their place in the flow of time and space. While this assemblage of ideas might mimic how Bowie actually constructed his characters, quickly moving from one to another, and then reviving the same character many years later (for example, *Space Oddity's* Major Tom of 1969 and then creating a sequel in *Ashes to Ashes* in 1980), the imitative representation, or mimesis, of Bowie's process in the layout of the exhibition simply did not work. Knowing how important *Young Americans* was to my own gay history, I searched for about 15 minutes with a guide from the exhibition looking for references to *Young Americans* and the influence of soul music on Bowie. We eventually found just two Thin White Duke suits tucked away right at the end of the show. In the bowels of the dark, subterranean bunker that is ACMI too many artefacts were crammed into too small a location. The artefacts, the ideas and the art have little room to breathe.

Having said that, this is still a mesmerising exhibition. Allow three to four hours at least. If you are a Bowie fan it's a 100% must see; and if you are an aficionado of contemporary culture, you will be amazed at the sources Bowie draws from to create his art, his personas. It did no harm, either, that Bowie had access to some of the most creative designers in the world for his costumes and sets, but he was the inventive force. What a man, what an artist, not just a man who fell to earth, but a man who changed the world. He was REAL, his personae were REAL, his art was REAL. He was an astronaut of inner space and when he looked down the barrel of the lens he spoke to young rebels in an authentic voice. He was our hero and no one else's.

As the singer Sylvester would later say: “You make me feel mighty real.” Chimerical, pansexual David, we love you!

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Masayoshi Sukita (Japanese, b. 1938) (photographer)

David Bowie

1973

© Sukita / The David Bowie Archive



Freddie Burretti (designer) (British, b. 1952)

Quilted two-piece suit

1972

Designed by Freddie Burretti for the 'Ziggy Stardust' tour

Courtesy of The David Bowie Archive

© Victoria and Albert Museum



Kansai Yamamoto (Japanese, 1944-2020) (designer)
Masayoshi Sukita (Japanese, b. 1938) (photographer)
Striped bodysuit for the Aladdin Sane tour
1973
© Sukita / The David Bowie Archive



Brian Duffy (English, 1933-2010)
Album cover shoot for Aladdin Sane
1973
© Duffy Archive & The David Bowie Archive



Freddie Burretti (British, b. 1952) (designer)

Ice-blue suit

1972

Designed for the 'Life on Mars?' video

Courtesy of The David Bowie Archive

© Victoria and Albert Museum



Kansai Yamamoto (Japanese, 1944-2020) (designer)
Asymmetric knitted bodysuit
1973
Designed for the 'Aladdin Sane' tour
Courtesy of The David Bowie Archive
© Victoria and Albert Museum



Brian Duffy (English, 1933-2010)

David Bowie during the filming of the 'Ashes to Ashes' video
1980

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