

# Why I write such excellent songs

David Bowie, 1947–2016

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As the limousine cruises its way through an arid Californian landscape, a pale and thin David Bowie sits in the back and humorously reflects that he never wanted to be a rock 'n' roll star, 'honest guv, I wasn't even there'. This is a 27-year-old Bowie talking to Alan Yentob in 1974 and screened as the BBC documentary *Cracked Actor* in 1975. For a 14-year-old fan, it was a pivotal moment: here was an articulate rock musician talking and singing about all manner of strange things, including psychosomatic death wishes, and giving a brilliant and emotionally charged rendition of Jacques Brel's *My Death*. A stranger in a strange land. The concert footage featured the *Diamond Dogs* revue, which never came to the UK, and included Bowie being projected over the audience for *Space Oddity*, seated aloft a cherry picker, wrapped around in rope for 'Diamond Dogs', and encased by a giant bejewelled blue hand for 'Time'. This may have been rock 'n' roll, but not as anyone knew it. *Cracked Actor* left one bewitched, bothered and bewildered, and wanting to be part of the Bowie universe.

Bowie's remark to Yentob in the limousine back in 1974 reflects a predicament he felt throughout his musical life: was he fated to be a mere rock star or could he be recognized as an artist who had chosen rock as his medium of expression?<sup>1</sup> How could one separate the rock 'n' roll myth – including rock 'n' roll suicide – from the artistic reality? By the end of his life Bowie had achieved what he had sought from the beginning: to be recognized as first and foremost an artist. As his manager of the late 1960s, Ken Pitt, put it: Bowie was 'never a devotee or exponent of rock 'n' roll. Whenever he rocked and rolled he did so in the context of theatre, as an actor. It has been his most successful role to date.'<sup>2</sup> Of course, such a statement belies the fact that for a good part of the 1970s, when he arguably produced much of his finest work, Bowie was the classic case of a rock 'n' roll casualty, up to his red-eyed eyeballs in drug addiction. As he observed in an interview of 1977, having left Los Angeles for Berlin, he was infuriated that he was still in rock 'n' roll, sucked right into the centre of it, 'in the middle of this crazy and filthy rock 'n' roll circus'.<sup>3</sup>

To his fans Bowie was not just a rock star but also a way of life. John Gray, writing recently in the *New Statesman*, is right to insist on his shaman-like qualities.<sup>4</sup> Bowie lured you into a world of art and alterity. In her own appreciation in *Mojo*, Siouxsie Sioux notes that the release of every album was like an event: one waited for them, examined them when they came out, and absorbed their entire content, listening to them over a period of many years.<sup>5</sup> In his late years, it seems that Bowie aimed to restore something of this event-like status, now rare in the world of rock where

everything is predigested and we live in a world of wall-to-wall music. He stopped doing interviews and left it to band members and his producer, Tony Visconti, to provide accounts of the albums, *The Next Day* (2013) and *Blackstar* (2016), reasserting the enigmatic character of his profile.

What was Bowie's art? In early interviews, such as the ones he gave during his first visit to the USA in 1971 to promote *The Man Who Sold the World*, he spoke of the rock music business as creating images to which audiences relate as they want. His aim, he said, was to supply another image, not so much of a new society but of a coming new world. This is the Nietzschean-inspired world of the *Homo superior* invoked in 'The Supermen' from *The Man Who Sold the World* and appealed to more directly in *Hunky Dory* (1971). In the 1970s it became standard to conceptualize Bowie as the Andy Warhol of the rock world, and clearly Bowie did study Warhol and the Factory entourage of 'speed freaks and transvestites', especially as he developed the character of Ziggy Stardust.<sup>6</sup> This is to construe him as a 'blank canvas on which consumers write their dreams', as Simon Frith and Howard Horne contend in their 1987 *Art as Pop*.<sup>7</sup> Frith noted in 1973 that Bowie constructs music not around a sound or a style but rather around an image, as a direct provocation to rock purism.<sup>8</sup> Bowie himself saw it in terms of a *synthesis* of the audio and the visual, and he pictured himself as part of a school that attempted to drag all the arts together so as to create a potpourri, a new kind of 'essence' of English music. He reflected: 'It started even before us, in the mid-1960s, when so many of our rhythm and blues bands came out of art school. In



Britain there was always the joke that you went to art school to learn to play blues guitar.<sup>9</sup>

Bowie often lost his way: there was the failure of success and the success of failure. There are many David Bowies to reflect upon, and I don't just mean the characters he assumed and as a way of masking his shyness and social ineptness. His life is a lesson in the spoils of fame and celebrity, in the corruption of art by money, and in how to survive an existence on the edge in accordance with the demands of Dionysian excess. Simon Critchley has written of Bowie's music as a search for love and connection,<sup>10</sup> and indeed there are many songs that testify to this yearning: from the grandeur of 'Station to Station' ('it's not the side effects of the cocaine, I'm thinking that it must be love...') through to 'Under Pressure'. This is about love on a social as much as a personal level.

As the years unfolded Bowie came to appreciate, through the influence of Brian Eno in particular, that there was an enormous gap between living life and being an artist. The aim, he once put it, was to remain 'artistically illegitimate'.<sup>11</sup> As Critchley states

in his book: 'The point is that during the 1970s ... Bowie was able to mobilize an artistic *discipline* that is terrifying in its intensity, daring, and risk.<sup>12</sup> Reflecting on his death in the *Guardian*, John Harris said that in mourning Bowie's death we mark the end of an era when art could truly subvert on a popular scale: 'a world in which art could fracture normality, an idea that now seems strangely quaint'.<sup>13</sup> As Bowie himself once mused: 'When Nietzsche said, "There is no God", that really disturbed the 20th century. And it fucked everything up – philosophically and spiritually – when he said that.'<sup>14</sup> Bowie similarly wanted to fuck things up in the world of rock and pop. On one occasion he compared his art to a search *for* God, but in the sense of an effort to

reclaim the unmentionable, the unsayable and the unspeakable, 'all those things', he said in 2003, 'that come into being a composer, into writing music, into searching for notes and pieces of musical information that don't exist'.<sup>15</sup>

For Critchley, Bowie's vision is a consistently dystopian one, as seen in songs such as 'Five Years' from the album *Ziggy Stardust* (1972), with its pre-apocalyptic melancholy, the post-apocalyptic reveries of 'Drive-in-Saturday' on the 1973 album *Aladdin Sane*, and, above all, the 1974 *Diamond Dogs* album with its opening cry, 'This ain't rock 'n' roll, this is genocide'.<sup>16</sup> In fact, and although Bowie's song writing is never didactic, there is a lament in his writing for a *lost* or *failed* utopia, which is perhaps not surprising given that it was in the 1960s that he began to mature as both an artist and a person. The best example is the epic and extraordinary 'Cygnet Committee' from the album originally titled *Man of Words, Man of Music*. For the utopian Bowie, listen to the closing track of the same album, 'Memory of a Free Festival'. This lament continues right up to the song 'Fall Dog Bombs the Moon' on the 2003 album *Reality*, where Bowie sings ominously: 'These blackest of years that have no sound; no shape, no depth, no underground ... devil in the market-place, devil in your bleeding face.'

While, then, Critchley locates in Bowie's art a distinctly Warholian aesthetic of inauthenticity<sup>17</sup> – and he's right to the degree that Bowie *plays* at being a rock 'n' roll star (and did anyone play it better?) – one should not lose sight of the emotional impact of much of the music, too often neglected at the expense of a focus on the image. For Bowie there was 'an emotional engine' created by the juxtaposition of musical texture and lyrics: 'that's probably what art does best: it manifests that which is impossible to articulate', he once said in an interview.<sup>18</sup> Popular music is an art form, and Bowie was a master of the genre, even when this meant conveying emotion in a contrived, actor-like fashion. Forever the actor, forever the conveyor of truths: 'His art is a radically contrived and reflexively aware confection of illusion whose fakery is not false, but at the service of felt, corporeal truth'.<sup>19</sup> This is sublime Bowie, creating inauthentic pop music; so much more than the liberal clichés of endless self-reinvention and limitless change. It has the power to transport.

In spite of his aesthetic of inauthenticity, Bowie honed his craft as a writer of great three-minute pop songs. He saw his music as akin to painting, an attempt to portray ideas and reflect on life. One of the best examples is the song 'Life on Mars', from what is many people's favourite Bowie album, *Hunky Dory* (1971). Hearing the song for the first time on the radio was a supremely philosophical moment for me. It was like a philosophical short story in three glorious minutes, and to this day the song has for me the grandeur of the transfiguration of the everyday and the commonplace, never failing to provide me with the proverbial sense of wonder associated with philosophy. It wasn't just the lyrics, but the sense of the aporetic, the significance of that question



mark. Philosophy as the staging of the question mark was part of my initial attraction to Nietzsche, the philosopher of the question mark par excellence. I appreciated the deferral of meaning and the rich ambiguities. Bowie not only opened up my sexuality and complicated my identity; he also put me in touch with a philosophical world.

On occasion, Bowie would describe our condition as a *post-philosophical* world, by which he meant that we had no absolute truths or eternal facts to hold on to. 'There's nothing to rely on any more', he once said in an interview.<sup>20</sup> But much of his work testifies against this lazy postmodern nihilism in its search for commitment and faith in life. One thinks here of mantra-like songs like the wonderfully rhythmic 'Right' on the *Young Americans* album and the epic lament of 'ain't there one damn song that can make me break down and cry?' on the title track. Irony can only take you so far.

Critchley contends that Bowie's lyrics are at their strongest when they are at their most oblique: in this way we fill in the gaps, both with our imagination and our longing.<sup>21</sup> One doesn't want to deny this, but, at the same time, one cannot also deny the emotional pull of so many of his lyrics, yearning for a better life and a better world. In spite of his celebrated 'ch-ch-ch-changes', there are constants running through Bowie's music, such as the way he questions our search for meaning and redemption, from the song 'Quicksand' on *Hunky Dory* to several tracks on *Heathen* of 2002, probably his finest album from the late period. The final song on that album poses a series of philosophical questions, as Bowie reflects on his own mortality, the passing of time, unfulfilled dreams, and what are perhaps vain hopes for humanity: 'Is there no reason?', he cries. 'Have I stared too long?'

Bowie wore many masks in his lifetime; he often hid behind them; and he frequently lost his way wearing them. But he could also be fearless and honest, and his last performance may be his most honest. In his final video shoot, screened just three days before his death, for the song *Lazarus*, we see Bowie on his deathbed, aware of his impending death, frantically wanting to release his creativity for one last time. Since his death it has been revealed that there is a long list of unscheduled musical releases that he planned before his death. Bowie exerted tight control over what was released from the archives; it is to be hoped that his wishes are respected and only the highest quality material is released. Welcome to the Bowie universe.

## Notes

1. On this relation between 'art' and rock, see also the obituaries of Captain Beefheart and Lou Reed by Ben Watson and David Cunningham: 'Vorticist Artist', *Radical Philosophy* 166, March/April 2011; and 'Rock as Minimal Modernism', *Radical Philosophy* 183, January/February 2014, respectively.
2. Cited in Nicholas Pegg, *The Complete David Bowie*, Titan Books, London, 2011, p. 7.
3. Interview with Allan Jones, *Melody Maker*, 29 October 1977, in Sean Egan, ed., *Bowie on Bowie: Interviews and Encounters with David Bowie*, Chicago Review Press, Chicago, 2015, p. 64.
4. John Gray, 'The Shifting Shaman of the Modern Age', *New Statesman*, 15–21 January 2016, p. 35.
5. Siouxsie Sioux, 'The Eternal Genius of David Bowie', *Mojo*, March 2016, p. 70.
6. For further insight, see Judith A. Peraino, 'Plumbing the Surface of Sound and Vision: David Bowie, Andy Warhol, and the Art of Posing', *Qui Parle*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2012, pp. 151–84.
7. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 155.
8. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 163.
9. Interview with Michael Kimmelman, *New York Times*, 14 June 1998.
10. Simon Critchley, *Bowie*, OR Books, New York and London, 2014, p. 132.
11. Interview with Michael Watts, *Melody Maker*, 18 February 1978, in Egan, ed., *Bowie on Bowie*, p. 98.
12. Critchley, *Bowie*, p. 116.
13. John Harris, *Guardian*, 12 January 2016, p. 33.
14. Interview with Mike Jollett, *Filter*, July/August 2003, in Egan, ed., *Bowie on Bowie*, p. 392.
15. Unaired CBS interview, 2003: bowie wonderworld.com, accessed 26 January 2016.
16. Critchley, *Bowie*, pp. 76–7.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
18. Interview with Dominic Wells, *Time Out*, 30 August–6 September 1995, in Egan, ed., *Bowie on Bowie*, p. 256.
19. Critchley, *Bowie*, p. 54.
20. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 154.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 144.