

David Bowie, Ziggy Stardust and the construction of an image.

Simon Moses
Summer 2003.

In 1972, David Bowie released his fifth album, *Ziggy Stardust*. Up until that year, Bowie had been perceived in the main as a folk singer-only other success till that point was *Space Oddity*, 1969, which was largely perceived then as a novelty song, used by the BBC for their coverage of the 1st man in space that year. Bowie had problems following up the success of this track, which had reached no. 5 in the charts, and despite critical acclaim for the succeeding albums, it appeared that Bowie would remain a one-hit wonder.

By the end of the year, though, Bowie was one of the hottest and most controversial rock stars around. Critics were fiercely polarised- “most intellectually brilliant man currently using the medium of the long playing record” was one reaction, while he was considered to be a fraud by others. He also had fiercely devoted fans; they copied his haircut, a group of fans at a Newcastle gig arrived in wheelchairs, only to spring out of them when he arrived on stage, and the legacy of his work was a major factor in the appearance of punk rock, which started to bloom in 1976. So how did the transformation occur from The earnest young songwriter that was described by *Disc and Music Echo* in 1969 as “a gentle mixture of Bob Dylan and Donovan with 90% pure (himself)”¹ to what the 1973 publication *The Story of Pop*² referred to simply as “The disturbing Bowie”?

¹ Paytress, Mark. *Twentieth Century Boy*. London; Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd, 1992.p147

² *The Story of Pop*. London; BPC Publishing Ltd, 1974/5/6. p13

It firstly should be noted that this transformation was not an overnight event. One of the notable things about Bowie's personae were the disparate influences that went into creating both the music, the image and ultimately the character of Ziggy Stardust. His stance also fitted perfectly with the ideological state of Britain at the time. Britain was no longer an empire, and started down the slippery slope that led to the various power crises, strikes, discontentment and financial difficulties that the country experienced throughout the decade. Despite this, people were still living as if they'd never had it so good. Synthetic fibres, food additives and colour television were making the country a more lurid and futuristic seeming place, while conversely fashions of the early seventies frequently drew upon the past; one has only to look at the Biba store in London, a shop dedicated to emulating Art Nouveau and Deco styles, both on its products and in its imagery. Britain was a sick, confused country, and Bowie came up with the ideal rock star for the era; Alien, polysexual, self-destructive, artificial and thoroughly disturbing to the parents of fans, particularly those with sons.

The interesting thing is that in this transition, Bowie's music did not in fact go through a radical transformation; even the band were one that had accompanied him for the previous two years. Bowie's principal themes of insanity, gender politics and alienation were in place from early on in his career, as were the primary musical influences of his first period of success. Among the most notable were Scott Walker, Jacques Brel and the Velvet Underground, and this can be heard in 'Little Toy Soldier,' an outtake from 1967, where much of the chorus of the Velvet Underground song *Venus in Furs* is coupled with verses pertaining to S&M practices between a child and a wind-up toy. Kinky. His two

1971 Albums, *The Man who sold the World* and *Hunky Dory* both explored dark, complicated themes, and although both received a very positive reception from critics at their time of release, they each failed to chart until the wake of *Ziggy* pulled them in.

Ziggy Stardust was perceived by the public to be a concept album, which was not a new idea by then. Nor was the idea of a concept album concerning a fictitious band; after all, the Beatles had produced *Sgt Pepper* five years previous, and there had been similar works, for example, the Turtles' *Battle of the Bands* LP, where the group played each track as a different group. *Ziggy*, however, was the first time that the rock world had seen a deliberate blurring between the artist and the Role they were playing. Bowie's record label, RCA, ran a publicity campaign stating that "David Bowie IS Ziggy Stardust", and one could never be sure whether the figure on stage or on the television was the 'real' Bowie, or his creation.

Although the album is not a straight narrative, and historical documentation suggests that the conceptual device was almost an afterthought, the character of Ziggy is elaborated on in the title track, and despite rumours over the years as to who he was based on, the general impression seems to be of a rock composite. Bowie himself states that the character was based on Vince Taylor, a British Rock'n'Roller who had gone onto become a huge success in France, before becoming mentally unstable due to excessive drug and alcohol use-messiah story. Also though, in the five years or so before *Ziggy*, there had been a large number of Rock stars falling prey to various forms of self-destruction, either dying or succumbing to mental problems. Peter Green, Syd Barrett, Jim Morrison, Jimi

Hendrix, Brian Jones, Gene Vincent, Janis Joplin, Otis Reading, among others. And the Ziggy character was designed to be one of these, as Bowie put it, leper messiahs; godlike figures, yet essentially doomed ones.

The use of playing a role as a conceptual tool was thus very important to the record, and Bowie played the part to its hilt, with the help of his Manager, Tony Defries and his staff, plus the help of his American wife, Angie. David and Angie had married in January 1970, and it is frequently Angie who has been credited with pushing Bowie (who had been previously noted as being a rather reticent character) into becoming the outrage that he became. Before his 1972 transformation, Bowie had already become a decidedly androgynous figure, as can be seen on the sleeves of his 1971 albums. But his image was not hugely striking-long hair and feminine clothing on men were not hugely unusual on male rock stars by then, and were not totally alien from the High Street either. The T.Rex *Top of the Pops* appearance for the May 1972 depicts the most extreme androgyny in the period pre-Ziggy, with Marc Bolan, dressed in Lurex with glittering eyelids pouting his way through *Metal Guru*. Ziggy looked shockingly different though. This was due to a combination of factors, all of which conspired to make him look completely alien to any rock star or media figure that had gone before. In early 1972, Bowie had his long locks chopped and replaced with a shocking red spiky hairdo, apparently based on that of a Japanese Kabuki lion. In an era of inevitably long-haired rockers, Bowie's relatively short hair was a statement in itself. Furthermore, Bowie's clothing, both on and offstage was never anything less than striking. Bowie claimed that his tight leotard-like outfits were a Dadaist take on the 'Clockwork Orange' look, referring of course to the film that had been released to considerable controversy the previous year. Instead of the bleak

white fabrics used in the film, Bowie's versions (designed by his friend, tailor and sometime protégé Freddi Burretti) used different styles of materials, from a circuit-board like design to Liberty print fabrics. Rounding off this look with brightly coloured boxing style boots, this appearance was striking in itself, but when combined with his odd eyes, and by the end of the year his shaven eyebrows and increasingly gaunt appearance, it made Bowie look utterly bizarre. Even though he had looked effeminate for some time, this new, brasher image (which was duly taken up by his band as well) had another effect; It was threatening. This was aided by his January 1972 confession to *Melody Maker* that he was gay (despite the presence of a wife and young son). Although this was not taken terribly seriously by the rock media, as Bowie's star rose the public became increasingly aware of his family's extra-curricular 'antics.' It may not have been true, but it was ridiculously effective publicity.

This is illustrated well in the differences with the covers of *Hunky Dory* and *Ziggy Stardust*. On the cover of *Hunky Dory*, we have a facial close-up of Bowie, with him pushing his hair feyly off his face, and the whole picture, coupled with its hand-tinted look is reminiscent of a thirties foyer movie-still, with a hint of Warhol about it. The rear sleeve is also in soft focus, with the hand written notes on the back of the sleeves adding a note of intimacy to the album. The cover is *Ziggy Stardust* is quite different. Although the cover, again, appears hand-tinted, Bowie himself takes up little space on it. But if anything, this adds to the impact; in a dark, damp, industrial backstreet in London, Bowie, or perhaps more correctly, *Ziggy*, sticks out like a freshly landed alien. Which of course was the intention. The rear of the sleeve is, if anything, even more striking. Bowie stands,

hand on hip in a telephone Kiosk, which would appear to be an allusion to the BBC Sci-fi series *Doctor Who*, while the maxim in the sleeve notes simply stated of the album 'To be played at maximum volume.' Bowie has said Ziggy was mainly 'about clothes'-Ziggy apparently being named after a male boutique-and the point at where Bowie stood on the front of the album is next to a building housing various dressmakers, according to the plaques by the bells which is certainly appropriate.

The theatrical nature of the concept carried through to stage-shows by the band. In February 1970, Bowie and his backing band (who were a wholly different group to the Spiders) performed a gig at the Roundhouse as 'The Hype', dressed up in various outlandish costumes. This gig is not recorded as being a success, but can be seen as a dry run for the theatricality of the Ziggy period. At these concerts, Bowie frequently performed mime, and on occasion was joined by the renowned mime artist Lindsay Kemp and his troupe; indeed, Bowie had received tuition from Kemp in the late sixties. Shows were also well known for the interplay between Bowie, and his guitar player and sometime arranger Mick Ronson. One of the best known images of the period is that of Bowie gripping onto Ronson's backside, performing some kind of symbolic act of oral sex onto his guitar.

The effect was completed by the people that surrounded him. As stated earlier, Angie was the more extrovert of the two, and if anything was even more decadent than Bowie's image. She quite happily claimed that the couple were actively and contentedly bisexual. Indeed, at one point, she had a fan following of her own, quite at odds to the abuse that

say, the wives of the Beatles had received. Bowie's management company was also instrumental in reinforcing the image. In the summer of 1971, the play *Pork*, based on the diaries of Andy Warhol had run for 26 nights at the Roundhouse in London. Angie had befriended many of the players, a mixture of New York freaks and Warhol 'superstars' such as Cherry Vanilla, Wayne County and Geri Miller. In Nicholas Pegg's book *The complete David Bowie*, Wayne County recalls that:

“There was someone else [in a newspaper] who said ‘Pork is nothing but a pigsty. Pork is nothing but nymphomaniacs, whores and prostitutes running around naked on stage’³”

Most of the cast ended up with Bowie's manager Tony Defries' Mainman business organisation, which carried on where Defries' associate Laurence Myers' company, Gem Productions, had started off in looking after and grooming Bowie. Essentially employed to 'put on a show' and create a buzz around Bowie outside of the UK, the staff excelled in their role, indeed, they probably did take it too far, particularly in the USA. They generally put the impression across that Bowie was a 'pinko commie faggot.' Assistants were paid to make sure that doors were always held open for him, the entire entourage travelled in a fleet of limousines and their mantra was 'Mr Bowie does not like to be touched.' They both helped project the image and helped him fulfil DeFries' belief that 'To become a star, first one has to act like one.' Bowie himself was noted in that he refused to fly anywhere; American tours had to be embarked upon using the QE2, which was even then, an essentially obsolete yet very expensive way to travel, adding another layer to the Bowie mystique.

³ P283

At the time, Bowie had stated that his intention was to create something that rested somewhere between 'Nijinsky and Woolworth's.' The art was not in the music alone; the art was the whole concept of Ziggy Stardust himself. As Bowie later stated:

"I wasn't surprised ZS 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."

And this was quite true. Bowie later reflected in Feb 1976 that:

"I could have been Hitler in England. Wouldn't have been hard. Concerts alone got so frightening that even the papers were saying "This ain't rock music, this is bloody Hitler!" And they were right. It was awesome." (bihow p30).⁴

And to see that, one has only to watch the footage of the final concert as Ziggy Stardust, just before the culmination of the Gig, and the final song. Bowie makes a short speech, telling his audience at the end of it that this was "not only the last show of the tour, but the last show that we'll ever do," which led to one of the most anguished outpourings of confusion and bewilderment ever committed to film or tape. One feels after seeing this, that Bowie was not overly exaggerating.

⁴ Miles. Bowie in his Own Words. London; Omnibus Press, 1980. p30