

David Bowie

David Bowie, musician, actor and icon, died on January 10th, aged 69

Obituary (aged 69) - *The Economist*, Jan 16th 2016

David Bowie's greatest years began nine days before *Apollo 11* touched down in the Sea of Tranquility, with the release of his single "Space Oddity"



IN JULY 1969 men walked on the moon, a technological leap all but unthinkable 50 years before. Three years later they abandoned it, and have renounced all return ever since. What boosters saw as the great opening act of the space age turned out to be, in effect, its culmination. Within a few years presidential corruption, economic stagnation, military ignominy and imagined catastrophe had warped post-war America's previously impervious belief in progress, a belief that had resonance across the then free world. After Apollo, the future would never again be what it used to be.

David Bowie's greatest years began nine days before *Apollo 11* touched down in the Sea of Tranquility, with the release of his single "Space Oddity"; they ended 11 years later, with the single "Ashes to Ashes". Over that decade he used imagined futures to turn himself into something contradictory and wonderful—an epitome of alienation with whom the alienated flocked to identify. In doing so, he laid bare one of the key cultural shifts of the 1970s: the giving up of past dreams.

Mr Bowie's future-fixation was most obvious in his appropriation of the themes of pulp science fiction, of space travel and aliens from other planets, of "Ziggy Stardust" and "Life on Mars". Other impresarios—most notably L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of the Church of Scientology—had ransacked the genre for mythologies of personal growth. But none did so with Mr Bowie's sense of dress and theatre, his sexual thrill, his salesmanship and his understanding of what his

fans wanted to hear. His alien allegories made the possibility of change—the heart of the future’s appeal, especially for adolescents—a matter not of remaking society or piling up technological progress but of revealing, or remaking, yourself. The difference between the future and the past lay not in it, but in you.

The proof was in the playing. Mr Bowie grew up as David Jones, a sharp-toothed kid from dull suburban Bromley whose parents held no aspirations for him. Through a talent born of yearning he had transformed himself into Ziggy Stardust: extravagant, flawed and sexually polymorphous, tottering on platform shoes and hiding behind a mask of paint. “Nijinsky meets Woolworths” Mr Bowie called him: a character who ran through 73 different outfits in 21 months. If he could so transform himself, what could make-up and attitude do for you—especially if you had outcast Ziggy, your leper messiah, to sexily show you the way?

He thinks he’ll blow our minds

Mr Bowie had taken a while to attract attention. Stuck in 1960s London, he picked up a saxophone and considered jazz, then flitted between bands; he moved from mod to Buddhist, from rocker to folk artist, hanging around London’s Soho with its sex shops and music clubs, exploring sexual ambiguity. Despite the success of “Space Oddity” his early albums drew little attention. It was only with the fifth, “The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars”, (1972) that millions of teenagers in semi-detached houses just like the one back in Bromley took him to their hearts and turntables.

Through these years and after Mr Bowie’s focus on the future was clear in his relentless reinvention of himself and his music: always wanting to see what was next, ceaselessly leaving the places he had lived and the music he had played for what was to come. “I can think of no other rock artist” wrote Charles Shaar Murray, a rock journalist, “whose *next* album is always the one I’m most looking forward to hearing.”



Some called him a chameleon, but he was the reverse. Chameleons change hue to blend in with their background; he changed to stand out, and dared others to mimic him. He was never afraid to murder his darlings. Ziggy was killed off in 1973 as he finished an exhausting worldwide tour at London's Hammersmith Odeon; he was being too much imitated, and Mr Bowie always had to be one step ahead. One successor was Aladdin Sane, a zigzag of painted lightning across his face; another, the most troubled, was the Thin White Duke, an aristocratic cabaret singer in black trousers, waistcoat and white shirt, needing only a skull to play Hamlet.

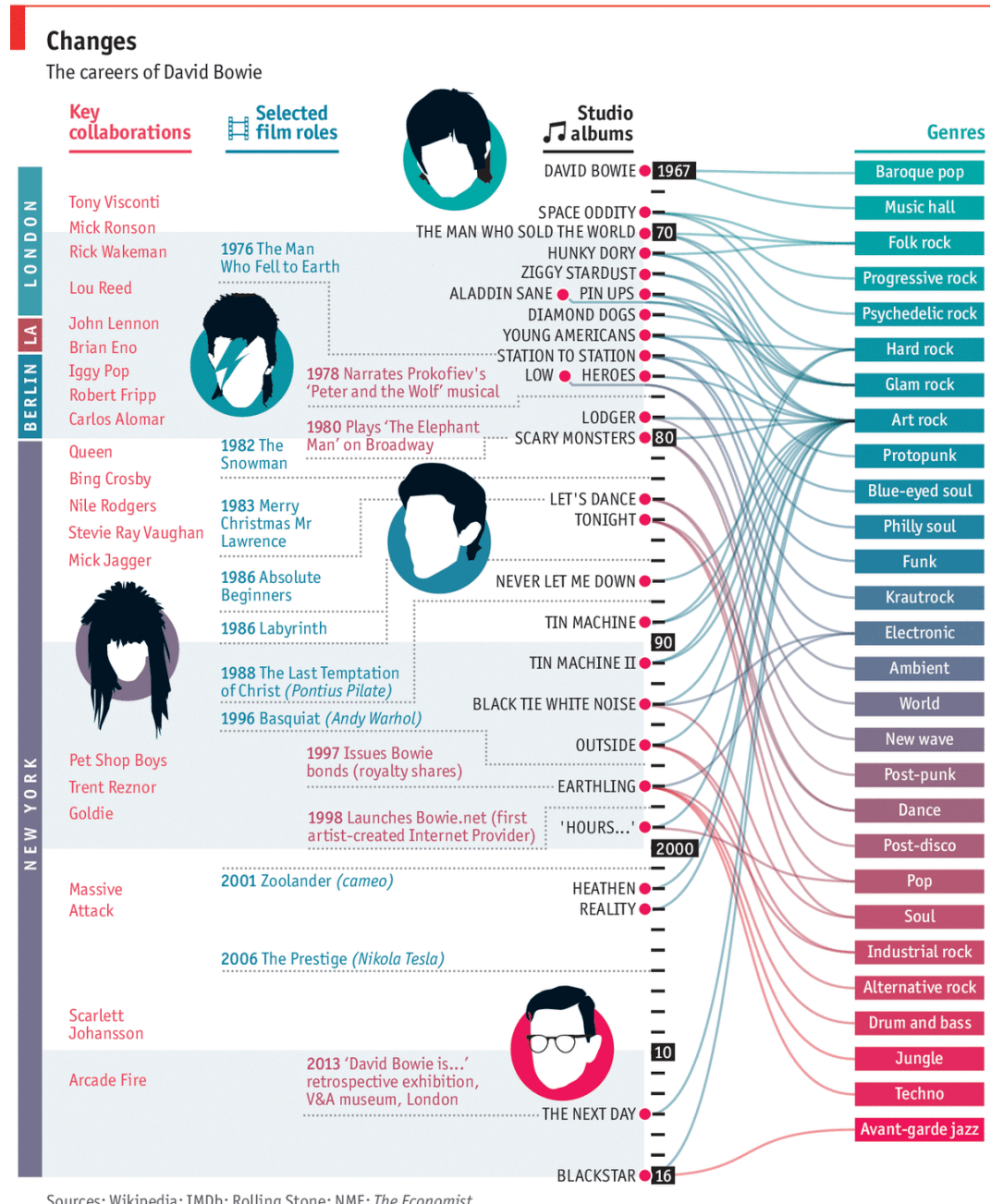
The tragic garb was well judged. As he dashed from persona to persona, station to station, so the worlds he pushed into became darker. Shaped by the threat of nuclear war, the cultural imagination took a catastrophic turn in the 1970s—one ever-present future was no future at all. Mr Bowie was there at the turning point; his song "Five Years" says more about impending annihilation than a shelf full of reports from the RAND Corporation. Spectacular levels of cocaine abuse also shaped this nihilistic trajectory. Settled in Los Angeles from 1975, he stayed up for days on end, sitting cross-legged behind black curtains, surrounding himself with black candles and painted pentagrams.

His diet was "red peppers, cocaine and milk"; always slender, he became skeletal. He would work madly on a song for a week, only to realise that he had got no further than four bars. Nicolas Roeg had originally been set on Peter O'Toole to play the titular alien in his film "The Man Who Fell To Earth". But on seeing television footage of Mr Bowie sitting utterly isolated in the back of a limousine he knew he had his not-quite-man. Mr Bowie, true to form, remembered almost nothing of the filming. There is no alienation like drugged alienation, and perhaps no worse place to experience that than "the most repulsive wart on the backside of humanity", as he described the City of Angels.

In "Space Oddity" Major Tom, floating in a most peculiar way, had been an isolated spaceman; by "Ashes to Ashes" his isolation was a junkie's. Mr Bowie later said that this funereal nursery rhyme (only his second British number-one single) served to wrap up the 1970s. In the 1980s he reconnected, refashioning himself into a much more straightforward, and less interesting, pop star and something of a Thatcherite poster-boy; embracing consumerism was another side of his celebration of the individual over all else. He found huge audiences in America with "Let's Dance" (1983); he sang a camp cover of Martha Reeves & the Vandellas' "Dancing in the Street" with Mick Jagger for Bob Geldof's Band Aid. His skills were still there, yet his sense of daring had faded. For the first time since Ziggy, he no longer drove the cultural agenda; like many an ageing rocker, he found himself seen as part of the establishment he had spent his life wrong-footing.

His better work in the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s, like the late work of many artists, seemed more a response to his own earlier achievement than a reflection of the world outside—but the stature of that earlier work, and the fact that it had done much to shape that world outside, still made the last albums far more interesting than those of most of his peers. Most poignant was his 27th and last, "Blackstar", released on January 8th. The video for the track "Lazarus" shows him singing "I'll be free—ain't that just like me?" before walking backwards,

trembling, into a wardrobe, and pulling the door closed. He had choreographed his own death—a step ahead, as usual, and a profound shock for a world that had been unaware of his cancer. Within days “Lazarus” had been watched 17m times, and “Blackstar” topped the charts. His producer, Tony Visconti, confirmed that it was Mr Bowie’s “parting gift”.



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[INFOGRAPHIC: David Bowie’s genre-hopping career](#)

Just for one day

“Blackstar” in fact harked back to his greatest period: the one, in the late 1970s, in which he escaped from Los Angeles to Berlin and laid the future to rest in a grave of strange, powerful sound. He chose Berlin to save money and live in a place where he would be unknown. Despite his fascination with Nietzsche, it was the city’s cultural ferment, not a dalliance with fascism, that induced him to stay.

He and Iggy Pop, a drug-addled rocker who was part-muse, part-playmate, part-protégé, shared a flat in Schöneberg.

In earlier days Mr Bowie had planned his albums meticulously; now he and his collaborators, including Mr Visconti and the remarkable Brian Eno, worked on the fly in the studio, the lyrics assembled with scissors-and-paste montage—or left out altogether. Much of the music was bleak, its synthesisers industrial, its guitars angry, its words disturbing. Take “Breaking Glass”: “Baby, I’ve been breaking glass in your room again. Listen. Don’t look at the carpet. I drew something awful on it”—presumed to be a reference to the pentagrams of Los Angeles.

But in this darkness there was grace. Freedom and honesty characterise the Berlin recordings, the veneer of masquerade abandoned. He had a sense, he said, “of closing the blinds and saying, ‘Fuck them all’.” And in a city as freighted with history as any in Europe, he felt he had at last captured “a sense of yearning for a future that we all knew would never come to pass”.

It is no accident that his greatest song of this period, “Heroes”, both celebrates its protagonists’ potential and constrains it: while everything might be possible, it is all “just for one day”. It is an embrace of the present that acknowledges the passing away of future dreams, but in its intimate immensity absorbs the sadness of that loss. It is, like much great art, universal precisely because of its response to a particular place—and time.