

Eulogy: David Bowie

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I was 14 years old when I first heard *Changesbowie*, David Bowie's 1990 retrospective, and I'd just started 8th grade. For me at the time, music didn't exist independent of the radio and my parents' CD collection. I'd never heard Bowie except for "Changes" in *Shrek 2*. But something clicked with me when I heard this compilation, now much-maligned if only because of its inferior remix of "Fame." In fact, it clicked with me so hard that I sat down at my parents' long-since-retired desktop computer and dashed out a review – the first I ever wrote, which I'd publish in my tiny, scarcely read high school newsletter a few days later.

At that time, I thought sexuality in music was Motley Crue wolf-whistling on the Sunset Strip. Prince had piqued my pubescent nerves, but he was too scary and esoteric to do much for me. David Bowie was – well, a lot like me. He was human. For all his ineffable alien cool, "[Suffragette City](#)," "[John I'm Only Dancing](#)," "[Let's Dance](#)," even "[Heroes](#)" worked because of his uncontrolled excitement. He didn't treat matters of the heart with jaded cynicism but with the same curiosity, delight and genuine fascination I felt myself as a gay 14-year-old kid who'd only had maybe six crushes at the time. He made me feel comfortable in my queer, pubescent skin, this fey little elf-man dancing around my dad's stereo.

Many, including the great critic Lester Bangs, have accused Bowie of using queerness as a publicity ploy. Bowie announced he was gay in 1972 while married to a woman, shortly before his homoerotic, star-making performance on *Top Of The Pops*. He then called himself a "closet heterosexual" in 1983 before declaring himself – in a description that still puts a smile on my face – "try-sexual" (he'd try anything). Was Bowie "really" queer? Even if he'd only experimented once or twice, he was more open than any pop star in 1972 had any logical reason to be.

The way I see it, he was just taking his time to figure out his sexuality, and it seems he never did. The same could be said of his image and his music. Bowie reinvented himself continually. There was [Ziggy Stardust](#), the alien messiah who thumbed his painted nose at norms for gender and sexual expression. There was the coked-out [Thin White Duke](#), plasticizer of soul. There was Berlin Bowie, mainstream champion of art music. There was the exuberant Bowie of the '80s, the same goofball that would judge Ben Stiller and Owen Wilson's [runway walk-off in Zoolander](#). Even if he was nothing more than a dilettante, he reinvented himself effortlessly, becoming only more influential and successful with each rebirth.

Before Bowie passed away, he was perhaps for the first time ever, looking back. The cover of his final retrospective showed him looking in the mirror, more than a bit forlorn. The title: *Nothing Has Changed*. "[Where Are We Now](#)," the first single to his penultimate *Next Day*, found him "walking the dead" sadly around Berlin; the album's cover was simply that of 1977's *Heroes* [with a white square over the singer's face](#). By his final album, *Blackstar*, he was warping cues from his Thin White Duke era, embracing his status as a rock star so chameleonic that he didn't have to answer to anyone but himself. This was the most austere Bowie yet – gracefully aged, stately, arty, but still with a mischievous spirit.

When Bowie died at age 69 on Jan. 10, he'd been fighting cancer for 18 months, with no word of it to the public prior to his death. He knew he was dying when he recorded *Blackstar*, and it's impossible not to look back and find portents in the lyrics. "[Look here man, I'm in danger](#)," he sings on *Lazarus*. On "Sue:" "[The clinic called, the x-ray's fine](#)." Press and publicity have plenty of explanations for these lyrics. If you believe Genius, "*Lazarus*" is told from the perspective of his character in *The Man Who Fell To Earth*, and "Sue" is told from the perspective of the lead in the 17th century play '*Tis A Pity She's A Whore*'. But now we know: this was the real Bowie we were hearing, telling it to us straight for the first time.

David Bowie was a star, an artist and an icon with an ever-changing persona. David Robert Jones, born 1947 in Brixton, London, was a human being who just happened to be exceptionally brave and talented. Too late now we know that it's that David we see on *Blackstar*. And it's that David – the excitable little voice behind the makeup – that spoke to me as a 14-year-old and inspired me to pick up the pen and write about music for the first time.

Comments

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