

## Double Takes: David Bowie caps his career with ‘Blackstar’

Daniel Bromfield and Alex  
Ruby



— January 13, 2016 at 6:00 am

Pop culture icon and relentless musical experimentalist David Bowie passed away this last Sunday, just two days after releasing his final album *Blackstar*. To gain some perspective on this soon-to-be-classic record, we asked two of our staffers – longtime Bowie acolyte Daniel Bromfield and new fan Alex Ruby – to dish up their opinions.

**Listen to “Lazarus” off *Blackstar* below.**

**Daniel Bromfield (@bromf3)**

David Bowie released *Blackstar* two days before his death at age 69. This was no coincidence: he’d been fighting cancer for 18 months, and we now know *Blackstar* was a carefully planned “farewell gift” for his fans. The record is replete with references to the singer’s fate, most portentously on “Lazarus” (“Look up here, I’m in heaven,” he cries). But instead of mourning the inevitable, Bowie clings stubbornly to life and puts out one last fight before he goes out. He isn’t staving off death so much as seizing what’s left of his life and milking it for all it’s worth.

This is Bowie’s most visceral album. He sounds more than ever like a frontman, hollering and screaming over walls of harsh, distorted noise from the jazz quintet that backs him. *Blackstar* features some of Bowie’s best vocal work since 1972’s *Ziggy Stardust*. His voice is strained, but he fights against its limitations rather than succumbing to them. The hoarse, owlish high notes on “’Tis A Pity She Was A Whore” are more thrilling – and better-suited to the song’s hellish soundscape – than a perfect falsetto could ever be.

Within Bowie's catalog, *Blackstar* most resembles the sweeping Broadway drama of *Ziggy Stardust* and the snow-white squall of *Station To Station* (1976). But more than anything in the man's oeuvre, *Blackstar* reminds me of [Kate Bush's 50 Words For Snow](#) and [Scott Walker's The Drift](#) – daunting, sometimes terrifying, fearlessly realized late-career offerings from artists so celebrated for their idiosyncrasies they can essentially do whatever they want. Unlike those records, *Blackstar* isn't a sweeping opus. It's a small, violent thing, like a burning lump of coal.

It doesn't quite reach the heights of the aforementioned Bush and Walker projects, largely because of two tracks in the middle. "Sue (Or In A Season Of Crime)" is a tuneless groove that goes nowhere, and "Girl Loves Me" alternates earthy profanity with what's ostensibly meant to be Lewis Carroll-style gibberish to jarring contrast.

The rest is some of the finest music Bowie's ever made, and were the album consistent all the way through it might be among his best. The title track moves thrillingly through multiple sections, with Bowie's tremulous lead offset by eerie chipmunk backing vocals. "'Tis A Pity She Was A Whore" is *Ziggy Stardust* glam on bad acid. Most impressive is "Lazarus," which finds Bowie's voice cracking and flailing like Yoda mustering the energy to tell Luke about that other Skywalker. The final two are touching ballads that indulge in Bowie's love of melodrama.

At 7 songs in 41 minutes, *Blackstar* scans as a pet project, something Bowie probably wanted to get out of the way before he died. Some might be disappointed Bowie didn't give us something more substantial, but Bowie has never been one to make compromises. The Bowie we knew and loved would never cap off his career with something tame and timid for the fans. (If you want that, check out 2013's *The Next Day*.) What he's given us instead is something bold, unprecedented, and uncompromising – a true Bowie original.

### Alex Ruby (@arubyrubrub)

I am not a Bowie aficionado and I certainly don't pretend to be. Sure, I hear his most popular songs all the time, but the only full albums of his I've listened to (so far) have been *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* and *Blackstar*. However, when I found out that he was coming out with a brand new album, I knew I wanted to find out what this musical legend had come up with for his newest project. I thought about all the changes he'd gone through over the past 50 years and told myself I would work through his discography after listening to *Blackstar*.

That being said, *Blackstar* is a great album. It's definitely not what I expected for my first Bowie album. Growing up, I was always familiar with Bowie as a glam rock and new wave icon. One of the first Bowie songs I had heard when I was younger was "Space Oddity," so I was expecting something poppy and easy. Not only were my expectations totally wrong, they were quickly discarded. I somehow knew exactly what I was getting into at the exact moment Bowie's voice floated onto the first track. His voice was so ethereal I immediately realized why he was considered such an alien. All seven songs on the album have very similar atmospheres and tones, bringing forward feelings of death and longing. However, this is not a sad album, it's just intensely emotional and abstract.

I first listened to *Blackstar* on the day it came out and just thought it was an ambitious, experimental album that signified an evolution in Bowie's sound. Leading up to its release, he stated that the album was [largely influenced](#) by Kendrick Lamar, Death Grips and Boards of Canada. Kendrick's influence is immediately present with its strong, powerful and thematic lyrics backed by free jazz allowing those lyrics to flow freely from song to song.

However, after listening to it again after his death, the album takes on an entirely different meaning. David Bowie was saying goodbye to us. In songs like "Lazarus," "[Dollar Days](#)," and "I Can't Give Everything Away," he sings about his death and laments the fact that he still has so much he wants to do. Hell, the last words on "Dollar Days" say "I'm dying to/I'm trying to." Listening to the album after his death makes it so much stronger, so surreal that you can't help but feel connected to Bowie.

Yet he accepts death as a type of freedom. It's really an album about the inevitability and acceptance of death. And he wanted us to accept it as well. He's now free to walk among the stars like he was born to do, and we'll keep calling to him from Ground Control.

## Comments

0 Tell us what you think: