

THE MANY FACES OF DAVID BOWIE

David Bowie loves to play a role. If he's not camping it up as Ziggy Stardust, wandering around in the drugged out skin of the Thin White Duke or acting in front of the film camera as an English officer imprisoned by the Japanese, he's coming up with some new face or some new sound. One critic from the Chicago Tribune described his music as 'an unlikely confluence of hard rock, 1950's rock, cabaret standards and sonic experiments'. It's this eclectic strategy that has kept his music and his image interesting. In fact it could be claimed that if Bowie hadn't demonstrated the possibility of continual role reinvention in the seventies artists like Madonna could not have succeeded a decade later. These days he likes to tout himself as just a family-oriented geezer from London who also happens to be married to one of the world's top models. Now he's here in Australia playing the role of rock star for the Australian press getting the word out about his new album and the current tour.

But many of the black clad and caffeinated journalists, at the first major media conference for Bowie's new Reality Tour, were bemused by the persona he had adopted for them. When asked serious questions befitting a serious artist he took off on irrelevant and surreal tangents carried away with being a buoyant rock survivor. After a few attempts one journalist, assuming from Bowie's performance that he was talking to a flighty and overly excited pop star who couldn't possibly be serious, asked a typical pop star question - 'What's your favourite colour?' Bowie called him an idiot and moved on, not realising that the journalist was, by now, simply taking the piss. Perhaps Bowie had spent too much time with Mick Jagger, another so-called elegant defensive who tends to adopt personas for the media. But for those who caught Kerry O'Brien's show on ABC TV Bowie was playing a completely different role talking clearly and eloquently and even admitting to his own shyness. His performance on Rove was also exceptional.

When asked at the media conference if he tried to launch himself these days with the image and sound he had in the seventies would Clear Channel, the multinational conglomerate who run theatre, sports events and radio stations around the world, play his songs, Bowie's upbeat persona changed. "They don't play me anyway," he testily replied. "They might be promoting my tour but they don't play me on the radio." So why have them sponsor your tour? "They're not sponsoring it; they're running it. It costs a lot to mount a tour and this is the way it's done these days. They're doing a very successful tour for me but as far as radio goes, they're no help whatsoever." Then, reverting to his designated role, Bowie continued with a laugh, "but I've come to expect that."

Bowie, born David Robert Jones in 1947, began his chameleon-like career by playing sax semi-professionally then forming his first band, Davy Jones and the Lower Third, in 1963. After signing to Pye in 1966 he changed his name to avoid confusion with the lead singer of the Monkees. Bowie also worked with Lindsay Kemp's mime troupe around this period, a turn which was to have long lasting effects on his theatricality. After a few minor hits, *Space Oddity* tapped into the zeitgeist in 1969 and he was away. He put together a band that included Mick Ronson, released the critically acclaimed 'Hunky Dory' album then followed this with 'The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust & The Spiders From Mars' where life began to imitate art. When he adopted the Ziggy character, a rock star with all the trappings, Bowie led all to believe that he was indeed the star he was portraying. His persona, and Mick Ronson's work on songs like *Rebel Rebel*, *Gene Genie* and *Suffragette City*, set the sound and the image for the coming punk explosion. From that point he was rarely out of the charts. He was also in demand as a producer working with Lou Reed on the 'Transformer' album which gave us songs like *Walk on the Wild Side*. He also eventually oversaw Iggy Pop's career resurrection. After a number of successful albums including what some have called his masterpiece, 'Station to Station', Bowie moved to Berlin and adopted the persona of the Thin White Duke. In this guise he produced a trilogy of groundbreaking works. These included 'Low', 'Heroes' and 'Lodger'. When the decade turned *Ashes to Ashes* went to number one and was culled from his next release 'Scary Monsters (And Super Creeps)' in 1980. This was often seen as his last great album until 'Let's Dance' produced by Nile Rodgers was released in 1983. He then put together a band with former players from Iggy Pop's bands which he called Tin Machine. From this point Bowie seemed to lose his chameleon-like ability to stay musically one jump ahead of the ever changing pack.

Reality, Bowie's current release, is the follow up to 2002's *Heathen* which saw him return to critical and commercial form with a clutch of great songs that had his fans and the critics breathing a sigh of relief. Bowie still could deliver the goods despite the dry and execrable years of his Tin Machine persona. *Reality* features nine new songs such as the compellingly insistent *New Killer Star*, the tormented *The Loneliest Guy* and a telling ditty called *Never Get Old*. It also includes two cover versions. One, *Pablo Picasso*, by Jonathan Richmond and the *Modern Lovers* and a great cover of George Harrison's *Try Some Buy Some*.

"I was unaware it was written by George Harrison when I recorded it," Bowie admitted. "As far as I was concerned it was a Ronnie Spector song," he insisted. "I'd heard it as a record she'd done in the early seventies and I thought it was a great record. It was only when I was getting all the publishing details for the album together that I found out George had written it and in hindsight it was quiet poignant given what's happened. But I've always done covers. The 'Pin-Ups' album was a covers album and when I was starting out in the sixties, before I started writing my own songs, I played everyone else's songs. Everyone did! That's how I learned to write songs."

Over the last forty years Bowie has used a variety of approaches to his songwriting. The most famous example being the technique he employed during his Thin White Duke phase where he took a set of lyrics, cut them up, flung them in the air and then sang them in the order they fell in. Given that a lot of the musical high points of Bowie's career have been with Tony Visconti at the helm as producer, and he was working with him again on these new albums, it was intriguing to speculate on what Visconti contributed to the songwriting.

"I've collaborated with Tony in the past and he's contributed quite a lot but nothing to the actual songwriting," Bowie acknowledged. "This time we tried to get as many kick-arse songs as we could and this lot are a little more positive with some good moods and some bad moods. He's a great producer."

When asked who he'd like to produce himself at the moment Bowie quickly answered, "James Angel from California. He's an indy but no major company will pick him up. I'd like to do Iggy Pop again. He's always fun. Also Mercury Rev. I've been listening to them a lot lately. Gandaddy. There's another one."

Then he was asked about his constant flirtation with films. What would his next role be? He smiled again, this time understanding the implications of the question. "My favourite film of all of them is 'Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence'" he said, "and I'd have to say it was my favourite role. I love to do cameos which I do mostly but I usually pick a role by whose directing it. When a director like Scorsese rings up and says 'David can you do this five minute walk on?' I go 'sure' because it's fun. I'd love to be a movie star but you've got to act and work at it and I don't have the commitment for that. I don't take it seriously enough. In the end it's not my profession. Music is."

Johnnie Clott

They don't play me on the radio

