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David Bowie

“I don't feel as though I hold a torch for one particular style of music. I find that absolutism outmoded.”

BY GEORGE PETROS & STEVEN BLUSH

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL LAVINE



So much has already been said about DAVID BOWIE: “He was the first Rock Star who...” — “Before him, no one had dared to...” — He single-handedly started the...” — “Every one of his albums was...” — “Everything he said was...” — so what can we say? That he was the first Rock Star who was Gay and Straight at the same time? Good and bad at the same time? Cutting-edge and over with? That he was the most flaming and focused and stayed cool the longest? That he is one of the handful of all-time world-class Rock Stars? How about this — before him, no one had ever blown your mind quite like David Bowie.

“It’s entirely possible that the idea of murder as art is an option for some people.”

SECONDS: *In terms of your writing, are hits a formula or a by-product?*

BOWIE: I don’t know, I don’t have too many. You’re speaking to the wrong artist; I think you should ask Elton John.

SECONDS: *Bowie impersonators over the years — do you see them as a compliment or an insult?*

BOWIE: I don’t know. They’re glitches in music history; they’re kind of interesting. I don’t really feel about them one way or another. There was a couple of Gary Numan songs I quite liked — I guess they all have their moments.

There’s always one song in there that’s worth it all. It was only recently I’ve been made aware of how influential my music — or our music I should say because a lot of it has to do with Brian Eno — has been on American bands. I always felt we were incredibly Eurocentric in what we did.

SECONDS: *When you first came out, did you feel part of the Hippie movement because your music seemed a reaction to those ethics?*

BOWIE: It was the thing I’m so against — idealism. Unfortunately, idealism turns into a certain kind of fundamentalism. I was a reaction to that, although much more naive and unthought-out. I kind of know what I do these days. I didn’t know what it was that I did in those days.

SECONDS: *Jimmy Page played on some of the Mannish Boys stuff.*

BOWIE: He did indeed, with the first fuzz box in England. He was this kid who just left art school and was the youngest session man in the world, fifteen or sixteen. He was a fresh-faced kid who had a real joy for playing. The Led Zeppelin thing — it’s hard to put the two

together. He taught me a wonderful riff which became “The Supermen.”

SECONDS: *We hear about your fascination with the New York stuff, Lou Reed, Andy Warhol, even Wayne County —*

BOWIE: Wayne County I met twice in my life and I couldn’t stand him. I had absolutely no fascination for him at all. I felt he was absolutely useless. I saw him work a couple of times — I didn’t know him at all. The only one I was aware of until I got to America was Lou Reed and The Velvet Underground that

I’ve been huge fans of since the Sixties. It was such an alternative to what was going on. The New York Dolls I got to buddy up with when I came over and we just felt like-minded. In England, their own form was Roxy Music and T-Rex, a loosely-knitted movement.

SECONDS: *I assume no one was selling a lot of records —*

BOWIE: Well, we did very well in England. It took America a lot longer. The Ziggy Stardust thing and what subsequently followed was quite huge in England, and so were Roxy Music and T-Rex.

SECONDS: *Your work with people like Iggy Pop or Lou Reed, was that collaborative or in tribute?*

BOWIE: It’s hard to say. I was a huge fan of both.

SECONDS: *You resurrected their careers.*

BOWIE: Well, we were all in the right place at the right time and it just worked out well for everybody concerned. It was collaborative, definitely, with Iggy. I spent a lot of time writing for him as well as producing. For me, Iggy’s strength was as a lyricist. I thought



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he was the funniest, darkest lyricist of the time. I really wanted to give him musical support that would get him a wider audience. It just seemed so unfair that he was virtually neglected, as was Lou Reed when I first started working with him — I was going through a very experimental stage when I started working with Iggy on *The Idiot*. I had some ideas which reached fruition when I started working with Brian on *Low*. *The Idiot*, for me, was a format for devising a new kind of musical scenario.

SECONDS: *What misconceptions do people have about the Glam scene?*

BOWIE: I think they believe we all had a lot in common with each other and that there weren't many of us — there were hundreds of copies really quickly. Within months, we had Sweet and Gary Glitter and all these others. I think myself, T-Rex, and Roxy Music felt not a part of all that.

SECONDS: *What's the relationship between glamour and Rock, and how has that changed over time?*

BOWIE: What I find with a lot of younger bands these days — especially the ones who've cut their teeth on a lot of the early Seventies bands — is that there's more of a desperate need not for recognition, but for insulating themselves from the world. What I believe we were doing in the early Seventies was making an occasion of our personalities. It's almost tribal now. There's a different spin on glamorization.

SECONDS: *Why have people run away from pretention?*



BOWIE: Because they're told by an art elite that things have to be absolute and pure. For instance, Keith Haring who was a wonderful Graffiti artist but was plucked from his coterie of fellow artists and elevated to a point ... we were given the impression that he was elevated into high art because what he had to say was an absolute of some kind — that it transcended street Graffiti — which is absolute bullshit. It's important for the art world to create a distinction because for commercial reasons more than anything else, you can't put a \$200,000 price tag on somebody who's just a "street artist." You have

to create a synthetic platform for them. They were many other Graffiti artists running around like Fab 5 Freddy who were quite as good, but because they didn't have a specific motif, a well-defined signifying character, they kind of got lost. If I stayed with one kind of music and

plodded on with it all these years, at least I would've had "integrity." I never stay with one thing for more than ten minutes, so of course I'm not "serious" about what I do — which is absolute bullshit. I'm probably one of the most serious artists I know. I really feel that it's important to my life that what I do has integrity, but it's not perceived the same by so many — I don't believe in a world of absolutes or fundamentalism. I don't

work in that kind of polemic atmosphere. I really am a fan of hybridization and I believe that the mutation of systems is the way that things will go.

SECONDS: *You've also had a career as film actor and stage performer. How do you view yourself in that context?*

BOWIE: Being in the studio recording is the most pleasurable activity of all for me,

“In the late Sixties there were several people walking about in London with great holes in their heads.”

quickly followed by painting. The other stuff I do for a number of reasons. Acting, for instance, is because I have a thing about the directors and I want to get near them and see what it is they do. I really have no ambitions in that particular world. It doesn't seem terribly exciting to me. It's probably more exciting if you're doing it in Europe, maybe in New York it's more fun, but God forbid one would end up in LA —the most frenetic, seething, hostile city on the face of the Earth under the guise of being this laid-back, cool place, which it is not.

SECONDS: *How did you get to that point in the Eighties —*

BOWIE: The main problem with the Eighties was the Eighties. It was such a nebulous, commerce-oriented period that I felt invalidated. I escalated myself into some kind of MOR hell with *Let's Dance*. I was treading water after that. I just didn't have any real interest in writing or playing. I just trotted out albums which, ironically, became very big for me. It was a terrible situation. I felt really frustrated because I saw myself in a cul-de-sac that I just loathed and hated.

SECONDS: *I can't figure out if you're bringing Art into Rock or Rock into Art.*

BOWIE: Brian and I have actually talked about this and what we seem to have come down to is that what I'm very good at doing is taking high art elements and deeming them down to low art, whereas Brian does precisely the opposite — he takes vulgar things and makes them high art. Because our approaches are so diametrically opposed, it makes for a good artistic

relationship.

SECONDS: *What does the public have wrong about Brian Eno?*



BOWIE: That he's not funny. I don't think they'd imagine he has an incredibly weird sense of humor — a very funny guy and extraordinarily pithy. Like all Brits, he's great at the put-down as well.

SECONDS: *Is there any music you've consciously avoided?*

BOWIE: Country & Western. I have no idea how to get anywhere near that. When they were carting Buddy Rich into

the hospital, the doctor leaned over and asked if he was allergic to anything and he said, “Yeah, Country & Western.”

SECONDS: *Tell me about your interest in body art.*

BOWIE: When I was a kid, there was a thing with the Surrealists that always stayed in my mind.



Andre Breton said in the Twenties that maybe the greatest work of art is somebody who would fire a revolver into a crowd, which was the first idea that I'd had that murder could be considered as fine art. Researching it recently, I found that in fact a guy called Thomas DeQuincy, who wrote a book called *Confessions Of An English Opium Eater* in 1820, had written a very similar piece for

Blackwoods magazine called “Murder Considered As A Fine Art.” I then started doing a research thing on where this had gone and how it had continued through the years. It seemed to be gaining tremendous momentum with people like Ron Affey and their scarification performance works and Kiki Smith and her anatomical pieces.

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Back in England, we've got a guy called Mark Quinn, who sculpted his own head out of eight pints of his own blood that coagulated. This kind of work is really gathering momentum. Noting the kind of tribal associations with a lot of kids in terms of tattoos and scarifications — when I was a kid, tattoos meant a heart with “I love mother” written on it. Now, it's gotten into a paganistic area where they're using indigenous American designs or Celtic designs. A lot of it has reliance on tribal associations. It's kind of out of a displaced form of religion — that maybe we weren't feeling as much nurturing from the church, and that people are inscribing their own spiritual and religious areas. In fact, it smacked more of paganism than accepted, established “church.” A lot of it seemed to go back to the Romans and their drinking the blood and eating the meat of the bull to enable us to go forward into the new era. I just felt that we're doing the same thing, a kind of appeasement to the gods to allow us to go into the next millennium. Using that as some kind of basis and then extrapolating on that, it's entirely possible that the idea of murder as art is an option for some people.

SECONDS: *Are you familiar with earlier examples of body modification, like the Comprachico cult in Spain?*

BOWIE: No, I'm not at all.

SECONDS: *They were notorious*

deformers — actually, everything from clitoridectomies to rhinoplasty falls under body modification.



BOWIE: I thoroughly agree and that's why I believe that what we and a lot of the artists working in the Western sphere do is a mutation of that. You get people like Chris Burden in San Francisco in the early Seventies who did extraordinary things like crucifying himself on his car or hanging himself with

electrodes over vats of water daring his arms not to touch the water.

SECONDS: *Then, of course, there's Joseph Mellon, who trepanated himself —*

BOWIE: Absolutely. That became a big practice in Britain in the late Sixties. There were several people walking about in London with great holes in their heads.

SECONDS: *How about transsexuality? That's a body modification form.*

BOWIE: Absolutely. Yes, it is. It's probably one of the earliest in the West.

SECONDS: *Isn't that the conclusion of sexuality, to become a hermaphrodite?*

BOWIE: All gods are hermaphrodites, outside of our own particular religions. Transvestite priests are very big in Indonesia. That's part

of their ritual — this androgynous figure wearing full makeup and female attire who is a high priest.

SECONDS: *Would the West have been better off if Christianity had been displaced?*

BOWIE: I don't think so because most religions that developed within the last



“It’s pagans all the way to the finish line.”

thousand years have been absolutist and fundamentalist. I think that’s so scary — I think anything that is absolutist and fundamentalist, including politics, is such a rigid and nonsensical system it just cannot work for our society. For me, the key word is hybridization. In the East, where the older religions come through, they seem to work better. In Indonesia, outside of the Islamic countries, there’s a kind of bastardized Hinduism that goes on where there’s a balance between the dark and the light all the time and all the festivals every day observe both sides of our state. There’s some very dark practices and some very light practices, but it’s a sense of trying to keep a balance, which I think is absolutely missed with our particular inclination.

SECONDS: *Are invention and reality opposites?*

BOWIE: Reality as it’s perceived, that there is this absolute thing called reality. In fact, reality is only defined by the inventiveness of your self. It’s what you

create around you that makes your reality.

SECONDS: *What’s the key to aging gracefully in Rock?*



BOWIE: Wear less makeup. I think that’s an artist-by-artist question. For me, I don’t think on the whole my music has been generational. I don’t think I’ve talked for a generation. I’ve talked about specific subjects but those subjects have grown with me. A lot of it is about negativity, alienation, those things that take a philosophic high ground. One sort of hones those subject matters all the time and they’re continually things I revert back to.

SECONDS: *When is sex appeal an asset and when is it a liability?*

BOWIE: That’s what popular culture’s for. What we don’t get looked after for as far as the Judeo-Christian ethic finds its way into popular culture. It’s kind of our gladiatorial arena; it’s where we fight our fears and problems. That’s why we’ve got our Stallones. I don’t think it’s gratuitous at all, it’s necessary. More strength to it, I say. Make ‘em bigger, bloodier and sexier,