

Photos by Laurence Abernethy

David Bowie Interview

Noahs is the concrete paragon of Christ-church hotels. Flashy and luxurious, it was the obvious bunk for Bowie and his forty strong entourage on their two date tour of New Zealand. It was rumoured that each member of the band had his own particular road manager. One of the many, Daryl Sambell, Bowie's Australasian publicist, had meticulously arranged press sessions for Tuesday afternoon, the day before the concert at Q.E.2.

It was a stinking hot afternoon, the hottest this year, when Sambell ushered the first group of journalists into a room on the seventh floor to meet Bowie. He looked remarkably fresh despite the heat and his early flight from Australia and he was in good humour throughout the entire conversation fluently answering the varied questions that were levelled at him.

As far as I was concerned enough had been written about his Ziggy Stardust period so I was chiefly interested in his musical development since then, but as it turned out some of his comments on those Ziggy days were more than revealing.

Was his role playing in the past a genuine part of his character or merely media manipulation?

"Each one was ostensibly a character but I drew on experiences available to me, some within me and some within people I knew, so it is very hard to pinpoint where the characters came from."

This answer struck me as too vague and evasive, so I asked him if he felt that his past Ziggy characterisation seemed ridiculous in retrospect.

"No. Ziggy was a pretty well defined, formidable and believable character and as such still stands as representative of that period. I often look back and realise that my characters were very much contemporary with the time they were in. Often the characters for me summed up the attitudes of what I felt came out of that year, and I used to go into interviews as the characters an awful lot so if you link up the characters with the quotes it all makes sense."

The conversation drifted onto *Pin Ups*, Bowie as the fan, days when he felt he needed "a breathing space" as he had just completed portraying two similar characters (Ziggy and Aladdin Sane) and he had decided to end the Spiders. Yet this breathing space proved insufficient as in 1975-6 he cracked under the strain of his complex characterisations:

"1975 was a very bad period of my life. I was in the midst of writing this very strange creature that I don't fully understand, the Thin White Duke, and on top of that all the other characters kept crashing in. So it was a rotten period."

Bowie hit the wrong side of thirty last month and he now considers himself to be too old to be writing for the young generation, but did he ever write with a particular generation in mind?

"Ziggy was aimed at a generation, aimed at young people at that time. He seemed to be pretty much what I thought rock was becoming. It was like *Young Americans* that was my approach to that. I don't think I work in futurist terms, I work in very contemporary terms and what I thought was not only happening to me but to the younger generation in America at the time was this thing called disco, this very white soul music that was being danced to more than listened to. I was drawn to it in an inquisitive way."

Young Americans can be seen as Bowie's last example of writing with a particular genera-

tion in mind, as from *Station to Station* on his music became increasingly more personalised and consequently more introverted. His starring film *The Man Who Fell to Earth* was the transitory bridge between his quirky disco and *Low* phases, so what happened to his all important soundtrack of the film?

"I didn't want to get involved in the music for it as I really want to separate my acting career very dramatically from my music. I don't want a film of mine to appeal because the album is selling. Roeg and I talked about a soundtrack but we never got round to it for that reason."

Even though a soundtrack was never planned you can be forgiven for believing that *Low*, the second side anyway, was a belated attempt at capturing the atmosphere of Roeg's film. But according to Bowie it had nothing to do with the film in any direct way:

"*Low* was made up of a lot of experiences from having travelled through Eastern Europe and I had a great interest in the ethnic groups from those areas, especially Poland. So "Warszawa" is a plan of the emotive quality of that country, especially the mountains. I wanted to encapsulate a mountain folk song feel, and not speaking Polish I put phonetics in instead which felt like Polish."

I ventured that both *Low* and *Heroes* were obviously non-role playing more personal albums. Bowie agreed:

"I think they have to be by virtue of the fact that they are written from more of an emotional drive even though they are devised in a very clinical and methodical fashion. The input is from an emotional area rather than from a more constructive almost journalistic expression."

Low was an album of dramatic changes even for the then Thomas Jerome Newton. Phonetic noises, unusual snare drum treatment in the production, devocalization and stark pessimism were a few of the features that marked it as radically different from anything he had ever recorded. I was interested in finding out just how calculated these changes were or whether they were spontaneous studio discoveries.

"I knew what was going to come out was going to be radically different from what I'd done before. It was my first move back to Europe and my mind was just starting to settle back to some rational place. And working with Brian I knew we'd produce something exciting. But there was no real concept other than that I wanted to put my impressions down of being back in Europe."

On his last two studio albums Bowie has quite deliberately strayed from rock 'n' roll, drawing his influences from "environmental sources rather than from back references to music" which he found "very stifling". Has he given up on rock?

"I've never really liked rock 'n' roll that much. I've often found it very exciting, it didn't really add anything to my life, but I saw the great potential of it as a new art form. Hopefully I've expanded from rock to encompass a lot more of the writing styles of the twentieth century."

Eno has obviously been an important reason for Bowie's musical transition, but D.B. disagreed:

"Not musically so much as a conceptualist. I love finding new people and then trying to employ their ideas. I'm very eclectic in that fashion. Brian I'd known for a number of years and it wasn't until a couple of years ago that we had

the chance to work together."

Bowie also denied that he was musically influenced by Kraftwerk. He admitted he was excited by what they were doing conceptually and he was quite impressed by the early seventies German avant garde rock, in particular Edgar Froese's solo work. This eclecticism, almost by definition rules Bowie out as an innovator but he described himself as "a conceptualist but a generalist in modern terms" when I confronted him with my reasoning. He prefers the title of generalist (his philosophy of doing anything artistically he wants to do) and he laughed "don't

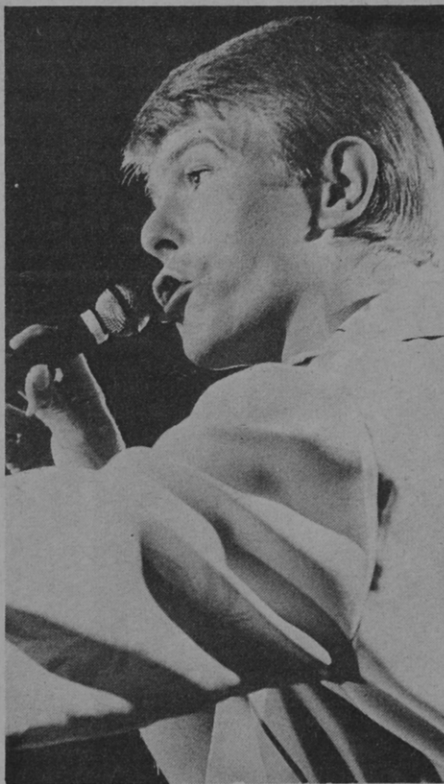


Photo by Murray Cammick

nail me down as a conceptualist — that's too heavy a burden for a small built lad like me."

With two albums of New Music completed when is the third instalment of the *Low/Heroes* trilogy due?

"About April. I've started work on it with Brian and I've done twenty-two tracks so far and I want to do some more in order to have plenty to call from."

Also contrary to rumour Bowie is definitely staying with RCA and his relationship with the company seems to be secure. He was quite adamant on this point and there's certainly no reason to doubt his assertion.

The conversation turned from his studio music to his present live performance and someone asked him why he was still touring.

"It provides me with an income which will last me for the next couple of years and I can put that money into projects which I may want to do in that time. I don't sell a great amount of records so I have to exist on something. I enjoy performing but I wouldn't if I had to do it. I can do something for maybe a week or so then I start getting bored."

With so many character and musical changes over the years he must surely have had difficul-

ties in blending his live musical styles especially when each style had its own particular character(s):

"Yeah I was in a sort of a quandary on how to fit some of the new material into the show. It finally occurred to me that the only way to enjoy the old songs was to forget about the theatrical associations and I just tried to re-listen to them as songs without the character. But I do lapse into character at times."

So the theatrical aspects of his stage act have become less important:

"Yes the theatrical aspect has lessened itself over the years. But I like to create an environment on stage, and because of the nature of the music at the moment the present environment has to be stark and void. It gives a feeling of depth."

The word was that Brian Eno was possibly going to tour this part of the world with him but as it turned out Eno was engaged in a cybernetics thesis. He has, Bowie explained, the ability "to work on something for hours and hours and hours and the finished product will be remarkable." This is in direct contrast to Bowie's own method of working which is more spontaneous and less time consuming; he dislikes spending prolonged periods in the studio.

Bowie described his present touring band as "absolutely splendid, superb" and I would certainly concur with that view after his Wednesday night concert. His line-up is exactly the same as the one that made *Stage* one of the best live albums of the seventies, certainly the best double live album ever. But why wasn't Robert Fripp, who was present on *Heroes*, filling the bill as lead guitarist on the current tour?

Bowie pondered for a minute thinking of a humorous reply: "Robert is still working on his master plan for developing himself as a small, very mobile and highly intelligent unit. That's his lifestyle." Hilarity all round.

In case you haven't noticed Bowie's lead guitarist is one comparatively unknown Adrian Belew (pronounced, bellow, "I call him blue" quipped a cheerful D.B.) so where did he discover such an amazing musician?

"I saw him on a tour with Frank Zappa and I was most impressed with him. Eventually we got to meet in a restaurant and I asked him to tour with me when he had finished working with Zappa."

Earlier this year Bowie completed a starring role in David Hemmings' *Just a Gigolo* whom he found to be great to work with:

"A very funny man with an awful lot of sensitivity. One of the few directors who draws and plans every shot before it's shot."

It appears that in the future Bowie will devote an increasing amount of time to acting. He has been dissatisfied with the scripts he has received so far for his film on the life of expressionist painter Egon Schiele, but he admits to having "a very personalized view as to what he is all about, and I want to see a script that matches my view." After a few more roles he expressed a desire to take up directing.

Whatever he turns his hand to in the future it is sure to be at least a step ahead of what everyone else expected him to do. During the interview the picture emerged of a man with the natural facility to be successful in painting, acting or music for as long as he likes. And still keep us guessing.

The concert the following night easily lived up to all expectations. According to certain music people the promoters needed to draw 15,000 to break even, and on my shaky estimation they just made it.

Larry Morris and the Angels (there are some familiar faces in that line-up) ably wiled away the early hours of the night. Very tight and professional they only lost marks when they concluded with, yup you guessed it, "Rocky Mountain Way".

Light was fading when Bowie appeared. He was attired in a glossy green two piece jump suit, girls, and only Sean Mayes on the piano in polka dot pants presented any visual competition. The concert was divided into two parts; the first mainly devoted to his New Music and the second part mainly to his *Ziggy* and *Station to Station* material. This surprised me as I expected him to warm the audience up with his old more widely known favourites but instead he swept into "Warszawa".

The white cold world created by his grid lighting system and his massive sound arrangement were used to maximum effect, but you can't help feeling that Bowie would still be impressive tucked away in a little club singing "Space Oddity" accompanied only by a battered acoustic guitar. The real power of the show came from him. He seldom spoke between songs preferring to remain aloof engendering that highly contemporary mystique that has resulted in his unique charisma. His music said it all, and there are few, if any, acts who can deal with the emotional diversity inherent in his music and pull it together to turn on the perfect, coherent concert.

His band was stunning, Belew especially, he made everything look so easy, but the climax of the night was "Station to Station" when Roger Powell on synthesiser managed singlehandedly to sound like Waterloo Station at rush hour. Two encores, the first was "TVC 15" and then "Rebel, Rebel" before which Bowie warned us of the perils of the National Front — "if you join them you're nowhere. That's no way to be a rebel."

Criticisms? I had none, who do you think I am, Tony Parsons?
George Kay