



# The Artful Lodger

## An interview with David Bowie.

"Allo Geowge, 'ow are ya?"

Yeah, fine, *RipItUp* New Zealand here.

"I know, we met, it must've been 87."

No, 78, at the Christchurch press conference.

"I was only a year or 10 out."

I remember you had a chuckle at the name of our mag, *RipItUp*.

"I was just young and foolish," Bowie laughs. "The Little Richard song was one of my favourites as a kid."

**DB** is back, no longer a kid, but one of the elder statesmen in an art form he's been influential in shaping with his restful, inquisitive and artful style. Now he's nudging 50 ("it's only 18 months away, but it's fantastic, very exciting") and on the edge of a tour with Nine Inch Nail Trent Reznor.

"He's a really nice guy, and with his four-piece band, they're one of the best stage acts in America at the moment," Bowie enthuses.

The real motive behind this exclusive chat was the promotion of his new record, *Outside* — a return, almost, to the cerebral, eclectic hey-days of *Diamond Dogs* and *Station to Station*. Bowie was to prove the ideal interviewee — enthusiastic, talkative, eloquent and amusing.

**Before the heavy stuff, let's dispel a rumour that you lived in Wellington for a while during the filming of *Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence*.**

"No, no, no. I don't know where that rumour came from, but it isn't true. There's another rumour that isn't true, that I had a big white house in Perth, Australia. I saw pictures of it and I was very jealous because it looked beautiful, but it wasn't mine.

"The only stuff I did in the movie were the sections we did in Rarotonga, where I have memories of treading water for six weeks. I never actually got to New Zealand."

**To the new album, the futuristic, detective nightmares of *Outside*. It seems it was created mainly by giving hand-picked musicians like Mike Garson and Reeves Gabrels role play cards and then starting the tape rolling.**

"Yeah, it was throwing the dice to see what would come out of it. It's not so different from the way Brian and I worked on those late 70s albums, in that it was about not having expectations as to what we were going to do in the studio. The way to break down inhibitions as to what people should or shouldn't be doing is to put them into roles. It's like when you play charades, even the shyest person tends to become something else when they're given a role to play and don't have to talk through their own voice. This happens to musicians, they become far more experimental, and that's how we got the strange atmosphere for this album."

**So, if the music was spontaneous, does the same apply to your lyrical ideas and themes?**

"I had ideas of different subjects that I was interested in and still am. Coming to the end of the millennium, there's a feeling that there's a

strange kind of paganism being revisited in the West through the interest in things like piercings. People are trying to find some kind of spiritual value.

"There's been so many artists over the last 20 years who've been getting more involved with the idea of the body as opposed to regular ideas on concrete, stone and wood. The body is becoming the new fabric of art, working on mortality. So, I typed up my feelings and attitudes on all of these different subjects, then I had my Mac computer randomise everything, then used what came out as a kind of fodder for my improvisation against the music."

**To what extent does the album's title, *Outside*, reflect the way you see yourself?**

"Not so much as I did when I was younger. Developing some sort of domestic life and returning to that situation prevents that. So, socially, I'm not so much an outsider as I used to be. But artistically, I'm still more interested in things on the periphery of the mainstream. My musical tastes tend to be out there a bit because I like the new vocabularies in the stranger stuff. I'm not interested in hearing things where I know what they mean. I like things that stimulate me intellectually, that are fresh. So, *Outside* pertains to that, and also the people in the storyline are on the outside of society.

"Another thing that inspired Brian [Eno] and I was we went to see a very famous mental hospital in Austria called Gugging. It was set up as an experiment in the 50s by a doctor who saw a lot of his patients showed an orientation towards painting. So, he used a wing at the hospital where his patients could develop as artists and they're now producing the most extraordinary, weird kind of work. That whole genre of art is now called 'outsider' art.

"Brian and I visited there to soak up the atmosphere of working on the outside, where these people don't pay attention to what the rules are. They're only interested in putting themselves onto canvas. That straight through line into art is very exciting because these guys don't give a fuck about you or what the art world thinks. It gave us a good atmosphere to take back into the studio."

**What was it like working with Eno again?**

"It was absolutely immediate within an hour of going into the studio, like we'd never stopped working together. We were drawn together in the first place because we always liked everything other than what was going on.

Biting bits off the edge and seeing what kind of monster you could make of that always interested us."

**With current mainstream rock 'n' roll being so uninspiring, you've got to go to the edges.**

"I look at it optimistically as there's a lot of really interesting things happening. A lot of it's coming out of white music, which had a bad time in the States up until the beginning of the 90s, and with Nirvana and Pearl Jam there was a new exploration of what music meant to young people again. And in England, there are people like Tricky doing some extraordinary things, and that particular multicultural slant on music has always been fascinating. One of the things I loved doing in the late 70s was an amalgamation of soul and R&B music against very Euro-centric industrial sounds. It's great to hear that happening in a genre in its own right. There are things happening, but you have to look a bit."

**In white music at the moment there's no cohesive or dominant movement or style.**

"Right, there's a movement of non-movements. There's never been such a period of individualism in terms of what you can say in music. I think that's very healthy as I'm all for fragmentation, as I think it's a much more accurate reality than the idea that there are certain rules and that things are black and white.

"I think things are even more complex than we believe. If we were to realise the state of confusion that reality really is, we'd all give up. So, we have absolutes in everything, there's one system of government and religion because it helps us believe we can steer a ship through our lives. What we're actually doing is surfing along on chaos."

**The fictional diary setting of *Outside* allowed you to slip into your favourite pastime of role playing various characters.**

"But this time I was in control. I didn't go off with them outside of the studio because I've not played characters since the mid 70s. And it felt, while we were improvising and the cards that I was given by Brian said I was newscaster of this technological society, that I would have to develop characters to play out this many faceted story."

**The plot of *Outside* is based on the diaries of art detective Nathan Adler, but it's suspected murderer Leon Blank who gets the best songs.**

"Yeah, he's my favourite. I guess because if my wife and I have a child it's going to be

somewhere in Leon's world. There's always the innocent, the one the finger points at. And I wanted a youth, someone to take the story through, but I don't know where it's going as so much depends on the computer.

"One of the overriding ambitions Brian and I have for this thing is, by the year 2000, we hope to have covered the last five years with a series of albums that in texture, at least, cover those five years. So, I don't know where the story's going to go because the year itself will help write the story, as well as the computer."

**Isn't this idea of the end of the millennium very much like the false fears conjured up by Orwell's 1984, where people were expecting things to happen and a mind-set to change?**

"Yeah, and I think they're going to be totally fucked when they wake on January 1, 2000, and nothing's changed. I think we've put up a huge psychological wall and that's one of the reasons we're reverting back to this neo-paganism. At the end of every 100 year period people go crazy, so at the end of a 1,000 years they're going to go bonkers.

"That's why we see so much of this ritual body art with the emphasis on blood and guts — people want to make some sort of sacrifice and they're doing it artistically and, in reality, to start with a clean slate in the twenty-first century. That's why popular culture is really useful, as people can explore their fears about death and sex. It is our gladiatorial arena and it's culturally quite healthy, so more strength to Stallone and Sharon Stone."

**I draw the line at Stallone.**

"But you get my idea. It's not gratuitous. I hate it when I hear moralists saying that the increase in violence is dreadful in popular culture. There's stuff in the Grand Guignol theatre of nineteenth century France that would make their toes curl in terms of violence, rape, incest and child abuse. It's been a continual part of popular culture, right back to the Greek Plays."

**From the roles of Ziggy and the Thin White Duke in the 70s, to current *Outside* personalities like Ramona Stone and Touchshrek, you obviously prefer to write from the point of view of a character.**

"Yes, and I also find it easier to project a fantastical situation. I'm not very good in linear fashion, it's far better when I cut things up and create a new place and new people that don't exist. I'm vaguely constructing metaphors, but they're loosely knit as a lot of it is stream of consciousness, so I'm only vaguely aware of