



A portrait of David Bowie by A. Homicz.

Bowie, David (b. 1947)

by Tamsin Wilton

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David Bowie, also known as "The Dame," became a leading light in 1970s "glam rock," going on to enjoy international superstar status.

Bowie's career has a longevity matched only by such grand old men as the Rolling Stones, and his status as media icon is unmatched by any of his contemporaries. The 1974 "Omnibus" documentary film *Cracked Actor*, exploring the relationship between Bowie and his stage personae, was the first of its kind; his fiftieth birthday was celebrated to international press and media interest; and in 2000 the BBC released a remastered CD of early studio sessions, which had acquired archival status. In the same year he headlined the equally iconic Glastonbury music festival, taking easy precedence over a younger generation of musicians.

Bowie was born David Robert Jones in the Brixton section of London on January 8, 1947, the son of a working class family that soon moved to Beckenham, a conservative town in Kent, where he grew up. A fan of Little Richard and jazz, Bowie began playing music at age 12, when his parents bought him a saxophone. He performed in a series of small-time groups while in high school, and then attended technical school, where he earned a degree in art. In 1965 he adopted the name David Bowie to avoid confusion with actor Davy Jones, who later became the "singer" for the made-for-TV band the Monkees.

Bowie's significance for queer culture is deeply contradictory, since his claims to be gay or bisexual were almost certainly never anything other than a publicity-seeking gambit. As a performer Bowie adopted a seemingly endless string of personae, from Major Tom to Ziggy Stardust and the Thin White Duke, and his theatrical stage presence owed much to early collaboration with gay mime artist Lindsay Kemp. Wearing elements of drag and heavy makeup was an intrinsic part of this theatricality, rather than the expression of any inner queerness.

It seems to have been Bowie's then manager, Ken Pitt, who decided to play the gay card. He arranged for *Jeremy*, the only gay publication in Britain at the time, to publish an article about Bowie in January 1970. This was followed in 1972 by an interview for *Melody Maker* in which the singer stated, "Yes, of course I'm gay, and always have been." In a 1976 *Playboy* interview he declared himself bisexual, rather than gay.

Such published statements were combined with such on-stage antics as fellating Mick Ronson's guitar and some very public homoerotic partying with Mick Jagger, Lou Reed, and Iggy Pop. But Bowie's appropriation of a gay persona always existed alongside explicit warnings from the star himself that nothing he said was to be believed.

In 1971 he cautioned, "My songwriting is certainly not an accurate picture of how I think at all." This is just as well since close analysis of Bowie's "gay" lyrics reveals little gay pride. Lady Stardust sings, "songs of darkness and disgrace"; the gay seducer in "The Width of a Circle" has a "tongue swollen with devil's love," and after he "smelt the burning pit of fear" (you don't need to be Freud to spot an anal metaphor here!), the protagonist knows he will never "go down to the Gods again."

[Admittedly, however, many listeners have found Bowie's most overly gay song, "John, I'm Only Dancing," reassuring and positive. The song in effect says that it is okay to be whoever you are sexually.]

It is an indication of the repressive invisibility of gayness in 1970s Britain that, however cynical and (arguably) homophobic Bowie's flirtation with queer sexuality, it is remembered as liberating and exhilarating by many gay men in both the United Kingdom and the United States. In the words of Tom Robinson, "For gay musicians, Bowie was seismic. To hell with whether he disowned us later."

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About the Author

Tamsin Wilton was Reader in Sociology at the University of the West of England, Bristol. She published widely on lesbian and gay issues since 1988, and visited many countries to lecture on lesbian studies and on the sociology of HIV/AIDS. Her books include *Lesbian Studies: Setting an Agenda*; *Immortal, Invisible: Lesbians and the Moving Image*; and *Sexualities in Health and Social Care*.