THE MAN WHO SOLD THE WORLD
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DAVID BOWIE AND THE 1970S

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There have been numerous biographies of David Bowie, but never before a book that explains how he emerged as the most vital and influential pop artist of the 1970s, or identifies the full depth and implications of his achievements. *The Man Who Sold the World* is intended to fill that gap, with a detailed examination of the man, the work, and the culture beyond.

After an initial study of how the David Jones who was born in 1947, and who struggled through the 1960s, was transformed into the David Bowie who shaped the 1970s, *The Man Who Sold the World* is focused squarely on the songs in which he reflected his times, and expressed his unique personality. Indeed, the book includes an entry on every song he wrote and/or recorded during that decade—the “long” seventies, as I call it, running from 1969 to 1980, and from “Space Oddity” to its sequel, “Ashes to Ashes.” These entries make up the bulk of the text, with each song numbered (in square brackets, from 1 to 189) in chronological order of composition. (When that information isn’t available, as with all of Bowie’s albums after 1975, the songs are covered in the sequence in which they appear on those records. The songs he wrote and recorded between 1963 and 1968 can be found in the appendix, and are numbered A1–A55.)

Interspersed at appropriate points among those song-by-song studies are reviews of every commercial project (albums and films) that Bowie undertook during this time frame and short essays on the major themes in his work and times, from the occult to glam rock, and fashion to fascism. Together, these elements build up a chronological portrait of an artist who set out to explore all the possibilities and repercussions of fragmentation during this era—artistic, psychological, and cultural.

The unabashed model for *The Man Who Sold the World* is *Revolution in the Head*, the pioneering study of the Beatles’ songs against the backdrop of the sixties, by the late British journalist Ian MacDonald. At
the time of his death, MacDonald was under commission to write a similar book about Bowie and the seventies, and his UK editor invited me to pick up the torch. MacDonald was a trained musicologist, and Revolution in the Head sometimes tested the understanding of anyone who lacked his grounding in musical theory. I have chosen to take more of a layman's path through Bowie's music, assuming only a limited knowledge of musical terminology, and the ability to grasp how (for example) a change from minor to major chords in a song can alter not only the notes that Bowie plays and sings, but the emotional impact that those notes have on the listener. I have used abbreviations for chords—Am for A minor, etc.—that will be familiar to anyone who has ever strummed a guitar. On a few occasions, I have also employed the Roman numeral system of denoting chords within a particular key. I-vi-IV-V, for example, refers to a chord sequence that begins with the tonic or root chord of the key, moves to a minor sixth (minor denoted by being in lowercase), then a major fourth and major fifth. In this instance, the sequence denotes a series of chords that will be instantly recognizable to anyone who has ever heard 1950s doo-wop music: in the key of C major, it equates to a sequence of C-Am-F-G.

Musicology aside, I have employed the widest possible parameters for my critiques of each song: examining the words, the music, how they fit together, how they are performed, how they affect the audience, what they represent in Bowie's career, what they tell us about the wider culture, and what influenced him to create them. The result is a book that examines David Bowie the artist, rather than the celebrity, and helps to explain the significance of a song catalogue that is as revealing a guide to the seventies as the Beatles' music was to the sixties.

Early in this project, I realized that every Bowie fan carries a different version of the artist in his or her heart. His career has been so eclectic and multifaceted that it can support multiple interpretations. This is, unashamedly, mine—the work of someone whose relationship with Bowie's music has undergone almost as many changes over the past forty years as the man himself. During that
time, there have certainly been periods (much of the eighties, for example) when I felt that each new, and disappointing, manifestation of Bowie’s career ate away at the luster of what had gone before. Then, as the nineties progressed, it became obvious that Bowie had succeeded in reconnecting with his artistic selves and compressing them into work that may not have been as radical as the peaks of his seventies catalogue, but still demonstrated a fierce critical intelligence alongside his enduring musical skills.

Writing this book has allowed me the delightful indulgence of being able to study a collection of music that bears comparison with any comparable catalogue within the very broad remit of popular entertainment. I have been thrilled by Bowie’s versatility, touched by his emotional commitment, and most of all, stunned by the daring with which he approached a genre (rock, in its broadest sense) that was becoming increasingly conformist during the course of the seventies. At a time when pop artists are encouraged to repeat themselves endlessly within crushingly narrow margins, his breadth of vision and sense of adventure remain truly inspiring.
THE MAN WHO SOLD THE WORLD
INTRODUCTION

PEOPLE LOOK TO ME TO SEE WHAT THE SPIRIT OF THE 70S IS,
AT LEAST, 50% OF THEM DO—CRITICS I DON’T UNDERSTAND.
THEY GET TOO INTELLECTUAL.

—David Bowie, 1973

Historians often prefer to ignore the rigid structure of the calendar and define their own decades. These can be “short” or “long,” lasting six years or sixteen: for example, the “short” sixties might be bracketed by the impact of Beatlemania in 1963 and the Manson murders in 1969; their “long” equivalent could stretch from Harold Macmillan’s “never had it so good” speech in 1957 to America’s withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973. What unifies these artificial eras is a sense of identity that marks them out from what came before and after.

Perhaps anticipating that the seventies might be less susceptible to easy categorization than its overmythologized predecessor, David Bowie effectively imposed his own “long” margins on the decade. At the start of 1969, he wrote “Space Oddity” [1], a song that punctured the global admiration for the Apollo mission to the moon. His hero, Major Tom, was not making a giant leap for mankind, but sitting in the alienated exile of a lunar capsule, unwilling to come back to earth. In 1980, Bowie returned to the scenario of that song in “Ashes to Ashes” [184], to discover that his reluctant hero was still adrift from humanity, as if the previous eleven years had changed nothing. “Space Oddity” turned David Bowie into an uneasy pop star; “Ashes to Ashes” marked the end of his long decade of stardom,
during which he had tested the culture, and his own personality, to the limits of their fragile endurance.

Like the Beatles in the decade before him, Bowie was popular culture’s most reliable guide to the fever of the seventies. The Beatles’ lives and music had reflected a series of shifts and surges in the mood of their generation, through youthful exuberance, satirical mischievousness, spiritual and chemical exploration, political and cultural dissent, and finally depression and fragmentation. The decade of David Bowie was altogether more challenging to track. It was fired not by idealism or optimism but by dread and misgiving. Perhaps because the sixties had felt like an era of progress, the seventies was a time of stasis, of dead ends and power failures, of reckless hedonism and sharp reprisals. The words that haunted the culture were decline, depression, despair: the energy of society was running out, literally (as environmentalists proclaimed the imminent exhaustion of fossil fuel supplies) and metaphorically. By the decade’s end, cultural commentators were already defining the era in strictly negative terms: the chief characteristic of the seventies was that it was not what the prime movers of the sixties had hoped it would be.

This was not, at first sight, the stuff of pop stardom. The Beatles would have struggled to capture the hearts of their generation had they preached a message of conflict and decay, rather than idealism and love. What enabled David Bowie to reflect the fear and chaos of the new decade was precisely the fact that he had been so out of tune with the sixties. He was one of the first pop commentators to complain that the optimism that enraptured the youth of the West in the mid-sixties was hollow and illusory. His negativity seemed anachronistic, but it merely anticipated the realization that Western society could not fuel and satisfy the optimism of sixties youth culture. “Space Oddity” aside, his work of 1969–70 failed to reach the mass audience who heard the Rolling Stones’ Let It Bleed or John Lennon’s Plastic Ono Band, two albums that also tore away the pretensions of the recent past. But even those records paled alongside the nihilistic determinism of Bowie’s first two albums in his new guise as cultural prophet and doom-monger.
Bowie might have maintained a fashionable gloom for the next decade, and turned his sourness into a calling. Instead he embarked on a far more risky and ambitious course. Unable to secure a mass audience for his explorations of a society in the process of fragmentation, he decided to create an imaginary hero who could entrance and then educate the pop audience—and to play the leading role himself. Since the start of his professional career as an entertainer in 1964, he had used his brief experience as a visualizer in an advertising agency to rebrand himself in a dozen different disguises. Now he would concentrate on a single product and establish a brand so powerful that it would be impossible to ignore. The creation of Ziggy Stardust in 1972 amounted to a conceptual art statement: rather than pursuing fame, as he had in the past, Bowie would act as if he were already famous beyond dispute, and present himself to the masses as an exotic creature from another planet. Ziggy would live outside the norms of earthly society: he would be male and female, gay and straight, human and alien, an eternal outsider who could act as a beacon for anyone who felt ostracized from the world around them. Aimed at a generation of adolescents emerging into an unsettling and fearful world, his hero could not help but become a superstar. Whereupon Bowie removed him from circulation, destroying the illusion that had made him famous.

What happened next was what made Bowie not just a canny manipulator of pop tastes, but a significant and enduring figure in twentieth-century popular culture. He channeled the momentum of Ziggy Stardust’s twelve months of fame into a series of artistic and psychological experiments that tugged at the margins of popular entertainment, and at the cohesion of his own psyche. Between 1974 and 1980, Bowie effectively withdrew from the world around him and created his own microculture—a bewildering landscape in which nothing was fixed and everything familiar was certain to change shape before the observer’s eyes.

Bowie’s methods were simple, and devastating: he placed himself into alien environments and cultures (New York, Los Angeles, Berlin; R&B music, experimental rock, ambient soundscapes), turned
them to his own devices, and then systematically demolished what
he had just created. In each situation, he pushed himself, and his
surroundings, to their limits, to see whether they would crack or
bend. Then he moved on, relentlessly and compulsively, to the next
incarnation. Ultimately he succeeded in shedding all the skins and
disguises he had worn since 1964, and all of the cultural debris, to
arrive in 1980: enervated, disgusted, exhausted, free. Then he, like
Ziggy Stardust, disappeared.

What linked the sounds of the seventies, Bowie once said, was
irony, and there was irony aplenty when he chose to reappear in
1983—not as a restless investigator of fresh cultures and techniques,
but as nothing more disruptive than the professional entertainer
who had been hiding beneath his skins from the beginning. The
irony was that his audience was so desperate to believe he was still
the David Bowie of 1972, 1976, or 1980 that they ignored his artis­
tic inertia and greeted him as a conquering hero—Bowie therefore
becoming exactly the mainstream success that he had parodied in
the seventies. Only in the nineties did his work rekindle the spirit of
more interesting times; by then the world at large was interested in
Bowie only as a figure of nostalgia, not as a creative artist. But that
is another story.

Fragmentation was central to Bowie’s seventies. He pursued it in ar-
tistic terms by applying cut-up techniques to his language, subvert­
ing musical expectations, employing noise as a way of augmenting
and substituting for melody, using a familiar formula and distort­ing it into an alarming new shape. He applied the same tools to his
identities and images, assembling each different persona from the
remnants of the past.

Even Ziggy Stardust, the guise in which Bowie left his most
enduring mark on the decade, was assembled like a collage from
a bewildering variety of sources, despite his appearance of having
stepped fully formed from a passing flying saucer. Elements of Ziggy came from pop: from Judy Garland, the Rolling Stones, the Velvet Underground, the Stooges, the Beatles, Elvis Presley, Little Richard. Strands of Pop Art were also visible in Ziggy’s disguise, from Richard Hamilton’s assimilation of science fact and science fiction to Andy Warhol’s obsession with surface and the borrowed sheen of stardom. Through Ziggy, Bowie was also able to access themes that preoccupied the wider culture: the ominous hum of apocalypse, the fear of decay, the compulsive attraction of power and leadership, the search for renewed belief in a time of disillusion. Ziggy represented the “over-man” that Bowie had discovered in the writings of Nietzsche; the Fuhrer who had commanded magnetic attention in Germany; the pop icons who had peopled Bowie’s own dreams; the struggle of Western civilization to adjust to a world order that had slipped beyond its control.

Yet fragmentation wasn’t just an artistic technique for Bowie: it became the only way in which he could transcend his own psychological heritage. He was born into a family web of mental instability, frustrated ambition, and emotional repression. In his teens, he had become aware that authentic emotional responses could not always be controlled; that self-expression could carry someone beyond the acceptable borders of sanity. He had always imagined that success would offer him stability; that he could only become himself in the eyes of an audience; and to achieve that aim, he was prepared to unmake and remake his identity as often and as radically as he needed to.

This fluid sense of the self was what enabled him to explore such varied terrain, as an artist and a human being. The pioneering psychologist William James once recounted his own unmaking of identity: “It consisted in a gradual but swiftly progressive obliteration of space, time, sensation and the multitudinous factors of experience which seem to qualify what we are pleased to call our Self.” He described this process as “mysticism”; and in his exploration of Buddhist meditation in the late sixties, Bowie would have arrived at a similar sense of what psychologists call “undifferentiation.” As
the seventies progressed, he explored a variety of ways of achieving this state. The most commonplace, for a rock star of his era, was through drugs, which inflated his ego, fueled his restless creativity, and threw his senses into disarray. From his complex family background came the tantalizing, terrifying notion that madness—psychosis, schizophrenia—might be a means of establishing his identity, and destroying it in the same moment. He spent a decade trying to avoid what his grandmother called the family curse, and then several more years creating his own form of psychosis with cocaine and amphetamines.

In place of Buddhist meditation, he became obsessed in the seventies with the exploration of the occult: the search for hidden powers and meanings, the attempt to reach beyond the conscious into a realm of unimaginable riches and danger. And it was that quest for something beyond that also inspired his artistic experiments, encouraging him to reach through or around familiar techniques to access material and methods that would help him to overcome the limitations and repressions of the everyday world around him. He would use erratic combinations of all four methods of escape—hallucination, meditation, madness, innovation—throughout the seventies, taking fearful risks with his health and sanity, sabotaging key personal relationships, and creating a body of work that surpassed anything in rock for its eclecticism and sense of daring.

“"This is a mad planet," Bowie said in 1971. “It’s doomed to madness.” Or, as novelist William S. Burroughs had written four years earlier: “abandon all nations, the planet drifts to random insect doom.”

Since the late sixties, the notion that mankind was facing apocalyptic disaster had begun to infect every vein of Western society. Cultural critic Susan Sontag noted that the awareness of fear created its own reality: “Collective nightmares cannot be banished by demonstrating that they are, intellectually and morally, fallacious.”
The global bestseller of the early 1970s was Hal Lindsey’s recklessly naïve *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which twisted the Christian scriptures to suggest that apocalypse would soon emerge from the Middle East. Lindsey’s book was no more rational than thousands of similar explorations of religious paranoia that had been published down the centuries, but it had found its perfect moment. Its alarmist arguments resonated through the popular press and prepared the ground for the ultraconservative brand of evangelical Christianity that would help to propel Ronald Reagan into the White House a decade later.

If Hal Lindsey’s dread was superstitious, it chimed with the sobering warnings of the scientists who predicted environmental disaster for mankind. The debate had been simmering since the early 1960s, erupting into mainstream culture in the form of tabloid headlines or science fiction dystopias. The threats were so immense—a new ice age, global warming, mass starvation, the exhaustion of water, food, or fuel—that it was easier to ignore them than tackle them. They merged seamlessly into the recurrent fear of global annihilation via nuclear warfare, meeting on the equally uncertain ground of nuclear power. As if to signal that the new decade would force these environmental monsters into our everyday lives, the BBC launched a television series in February 1970 called *Doomwatch*, about a governmental department whose brief was nothing less than the preservation of mankind against overwhelming natural (and extraterrestrial) threats. Hollywood extended the theme with the disaster movies that captured the popular imagination for much of the decade.

In the teeth of *Jaws* and *The Towering Inferno*, there was something intolerably mundane about financial catastrophe and the pervasive sense of decline that afflicted the West (and particularly Britain) through the early seventies. Successive leaders had been preaching economic doom since the mid-sixties, to the point where the pronouncement in late 1973 that Britain was facing its gravest economic crisis since the end of World War II sounded almost comfortably familiar. Industrial unrest triggered strike action among key workers,
and periodically during the decade, the British population was returned to the age of candlelight, as regular power cuts restricted television broadcasts, closed cinemas, darkened neon advertising displays, canceled sporting events, and of course deprived homes and offices of light, warmth, and electricity. These episodes occupied no more than a few weeks of the decade, but they left such a mark that they remain the dominant folk memory of the 1970s.

The optimism associated with scientific progress, which flowered briefly as man landed on the moon and the Concorde broke the sound barrier, was soon replaced by a debilitating sense of dread; science seemed as likely to spark the end of civilization as it did to solve mankind’s problems and fulfill its desires. Even computers, the wondrous creation of postwar technology, threatened to become the instruments of repression rather than liberation. It was no accident that in 1970 David Bowie wrote a song titled “Saviour Machine” [79], around a scenario in which an all-powerful computer becomes so bored with eliminating mankind’s needs that it begins to invent fresh crises to keep itself interested.

If computerization, with its taint of depersonalization and callous, robotic indifference, threatened society as a whole, then the growth of urban terrorism across the West brought the shudder of imminent extinction into daily life. Television news bulletins showed planes being hijacked, politicians kidnapped and murdered, shops and hotels exploding without warning; the implicit message was that nobody was safe, and any stranger could be the agent of sudden death or maiming. Car bombs, the murder of athletes at the Olympic Games, random shootings, picket line confrontations, the unstoppable force of flood or famine: these dissociated threats were woven into the psychological landscape of the age, preparing civilization for the savage hand of apocalypse to descend.

In economic terms, none of these threats left a deeper mark on

* This was exactly the quality that the German rock band Kraftwerk exploited during the seventies, exerting a huge influence over Bowie’s work in the second half of the decade.
the decade than the Yom Kippur War of 1973, a brief conflict be-
tween Israel and its Arab neighbors that pushed the oil-produ-
ing nations of the Middle East into imposing a jolting rise in the cost
of the oil they supplied to the West. Commentators routinely com-
pared oil-hungry Britain to the Weimar Republic from which Hit-
tler’s Nazi Party had emerged. “Declinism was an established British
state of mind,” the historian Andy Beckett has written, “but during
the mid-70s it truly began to pervade the national consciousness. . . .
It darkened the work of artists, novelists, dramatists, film-makers
and pop musicians. . . . And it shifted in tone: from the anxious to
the apocalyptic.” And so it was that in 1975, David Bowie, who had
been exiled in the United States for eighteen months, began to of-
fer a running commentary on the state of the nation in which he
was no longer resident, and which could be summarized in a sen-
tence: Britain needed a strong leader, and fascism would produce
a strong leader. That was the point where the apocalyptic imagery
with which he had been toying on his early-to-mid-seventies al-
bums collided with the side effects of his “undifferentiation,” with
catastrophic (if short-lived) results for his reputation.

The reaction to his quasi-fascist statements (one of the sparks
that fired the creation of the Rock Against Racism movement)
shocked Bowie into a realization of how removed he had become
from British culture, and from a solid sense of his own position in
the world. He no longer masqueraded as a commentator on Brit-
ish affairs; even the election of Conservative politician Margaret
Thatcher as the country’s first woman prime minister in 1979 was
allowed to pass in silence. Instead he took up residence in Berlin,
a city that epitomized the Nazi past with which he had long been
fascinated and the experimental music of so-called Krautrock, and
also an arena in which political ambiguities were still too close to
the surface for him to offer ill-informed generalizations about the
state of the world. In Berlin he would concentrate on personal reha-
bitation and musical transformation—the latter enabling him to
escape the accusations of irrelevance that were now being flung at
almost all of his contemporaries.
IV

WE ARE PASSING THROUGH TERRIBLE TIMES, WHEN EVERYBODY WANTS ATTENTION, BUT NOBODY QUITE KNOWS HOW TO COMMAND IT.

—Howard Junker, Rolling Stone, 1971

In March 1974, David Bowie traveled to Paris and then to Cannes, where he boarded the SS France. His destination was New York, where he would assemble the pieces for his most lavish stage presentation of the decade: the Diamond Dogs tour. He did not realize that, at the age of twenty-seven, he had broken his bonds to England, or that he was destined for the two most turbulent years of his life on America's opposing coasts. Nor was it apparent to anyone that this voyage marked a crucial moment in his career as a musician. Until this point, he had used the tools and techniques of mainstream rock and pop to promote themes and obsessions that were radical and dramatic in their impact. Now, in America, Paris, and then Berlin, he would leave his mark on the decade in a different way, by inventing styles and hybrids that would inspire generations of young musicians. The David Bowie of the early seventies was a conventional pop star who acted as a social revolutionary. From 1974 until 1980, he was an experimental rock artist who managed to attract a mass audience for some of the most challenging music of his career.

The primary purpose of an entertainer is to find an audience and then retain its attention. During the sixties, Bowie was unapologetically an entertainer, but one who found it impossible to focus on who he was, what he was trying to convey, and whom he was attempting to impress. The success of his “Space Oddity” single in 1969 appeared to have solved all three conundrums; in fact, it merely illustrated the hollowness of the goal that had sustained Bowie for the previous six years.
His 1969 LP *David Bowie* and 1970's *The Man Who Sold the World* were vehicles for self-analysis and bitter reflections on the culture around him. They spoke for him, but not to anybody—not, at least, until they were rediscovered by the mass audience who were entranced by Bowie's later incarnations. *Hunky Dory* in 1971 was a collective of attractively accessible pop songs, through which Bowie tested out his feelings about the nature of stardom and power. *Ziggy Stardust* was his commercial breakthrough in 1972; on that record, the concept was everything, the music firmly lodged in the mainstream; 1973’s *Aladdin Sane* allowed Bowie to continue his explorations of fame, within familiar rock formulas. His second album that year, *Pin Ups*, was a fashionable exercise in nostalgia, the comfortable refuge of a society in disarray. Finally, the *Diamond Dogs* album in 1974 brought together all the themes with which he had been toying since 1969, in service of a dark study of cultural disintegration.

Little of the music on those albums was beyond the imagination of Bowie’s peers; much of it was overtly indebted to his predecessors, especially the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. What marked Bowie out as a unique talent were the themes of his songs, and the ways in which he sold them (and himself). Nobody had ever manipulated the tools of pop stardom so blatantly, and with such stunning impact. Rather than destroying pop’s mystique as well as his own, his Ziggy Stardust charade became the most glittering image of the age. Central to its appeal was the way in which it offered one of the key motifs of the seventies: androgyny. By portraying—and, to every appearance, being—a bisexual rock star for whom camp was an instinctive playground, Bowie broke startling new terrain. As the openly gay eighties star Marc Almond recalled of Bowie’s epochal July 1972 appearance on *Top of the Pops*, “Next day, all hell broke loose in the playground. Bowie was a queer, and if you like him you must be queer too.” Previous pop stars had been willing to flirt with “queer” imagery, and then coyly withdraw the offer. What set Bowie apart was his lack of shame, his openness to what he called (in “Changes,” [48]) “the strange.” He broke down powerful but invisible barriers, and made it impossible for them to be reinstated. After
Bowie, ambiguity of gender and sexual preference became a common attribute of a pop star, rather than an unmentionable secret.

The resonance of that maneuver would endure for the rest of the decade, particularly in the United States. The year he moved to the United States, 1974, began with rock culture apparently being threatened with harsh restrictions upon its activities as a result of the oil crisis afflicting the West. Instead, the industry careened into an era of extreme decadence and profligacy. Rock was no longer a badge of the counterculture; it was a multimillion-dollar branch of the entertainment business. Its economic power was reflected by the lucrative arena tours staged by all major artists (Bowie included); by the plethora of expensively packaged double or even triple albums that were catapulted into the marketplace (Bowie contributing with his *David Live* set); by music’s invasion of television, film, and the stage. Meanwhile, cocaine abuse fueled the industry’s arrogance and sapped its creativity, symptomatic of a culture of hubris that would lead inevitably to the invention of punk rock. This rambunctious intruder did not destroy the superstar system or its attendant extravagances: superstars still filled arenas and issued multiple-album chronicles of their exploits. But punk did provide an iconoclastic style, ethos, and brand that would enable a dozen alternative forms of music to emerge and flourish during the eighties and beyond.

Bowie’s contribution to this culture of excess, and its antidote, was as ambiguous and bewildering as the music he created during the second half of the seventies. At the same time, he fueled the savage beast of consumerism, offering peerless rock-disco crossovers that became major US hits, and undermined it with a succession of albums that demanded their own musical genres. *Young Americans* suggested new ways for rock performers to utilize the sound of black America; *Station to Station* distilled the essence of German rock, the dance floor, and occult speculation into a genuinely shocking (and yet commercially viable) new sound; *Low* and “Heroes” demonstrated the era’s fragmentation of style, society, and self; *Lodger* invented the unhappy tradition of rock stars acting as instant authorities on the
Third World; and *Scary Monsters* compressed many aspects of Bowie’s stylistic invention into a stirring (if often uneasy) blend of rhythm and dissonance that would leave its mark on the decade ahead.

No other pop artist (in any medium) was as restlessly inventive in the seventies as David Bowie; none took as many risks, so obsessively avoided the safety of repetition, or stretched himself and his audience so far. Little wonder, then, that it would take the following decade for Bowie, and his contemporaries, to assimilate everything that he had achieved, and move beyond it.

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In 1976, cultural commentator Tom Wolfe coined a phrase that would endure as a capsule summary of the era unfolding around him: “the Me Decade.” He described it in terms that seemed particularly pertinent to David Bowie: “The new alchemical dream is: changing one’s personality—remaking, remodelling, elevating, and polishing one’s very self . . . and observing, studying, and doting on it.” Three years later, another writer, Christopher Lasch, portrayed what he called *The Culture of Narcissism*, and especially “the narcissistic preoccupation with the self.” It betrayed, Lasch said, “the anxieties of a culture that believes it has no meaning.”

The preoccupations of this decade and culture, spiraling out from their birthplace on the American West Coast, were psychotherapy, spirituality, personal awareness, human potential—an entire process of unbecoming one’s temporal self in order to become the deeper and more meaningful self beneath. A 1975 article in the magazine *Harper’s* laid out the consequences of this immersion in individuality: “Our therapies become a way of hiding from the world, a way of easing our troubled conscience. . . . What disappears in this view of things is the ground of community, the felt sense of collective responsibility for the fate of each separate other. . . . The self replaces community, relation, neighbor, chance or God.”

That “felt sense” began to die as soon as the participants in the
sixties counterculture realized that their dream of a transformed society was too utopian to succeed. They saw the gleam of optimism fade as the global antiwar movement fragmented into factional infighting; as the totems of the hippie culture, from revolutionary leaders to rock stars, opted for lucrative self-mythologizing rather than the defiance of opposition; as the wider consumerist culture enveloped and then repackaged the symbols of rebellion as (another Tom Wolfe phrase) radical chic. In place of utopia, it was strangely comfortable to lean on apocalypse—an eschatological obsession that was fueled by the belief that the dominant culture was too corrupt and diseased to survive. But survive it did, reinforced by the generation who had once pledged to destroy it.

So the collective energy of the counterculture dissipated into spasms of individualism, each convulsion representing a desperate grasp for meaning and purpose. Instead of mass movements, some of the young focused on personal salvation and transformation, which might be religious or political or psychological, and lead them into occult groups or terrorist cells or psychiatric wards. The underground magazines that had once been filled with political manifestos were now dominated by interpretations of ancient runes and manuscripts, from the Bible to the prophecies of Nostradamus, any of which could be manipulated to prove that humanity was entering its end times. Then the underground papers died, or became the new establishment, just as the rock stars who preached violent revolution in the late sixties turned into the professional nostalgists of the seventies and beyond.

From his secluded standpoint in 1990, David Bowie the aging rock star attempted to explain how this process had affected him and his peers: “In the 70s, people of my age group were disinclined to be a part of society. It was really hard to convince yourself that you were part of society. It’s like, ‘OK, you’ve broken up the family unit, and you say you’re trying to get out of your mind and expand yourself and all that. Fine. So now that you’ve left us, what are we left with? Cos here we are, without our families, totally out of our
heads, and we don’t know where on earth we are.’ That was the feel­
ing of the early seventies—nobody knew where they were.”

Bowie’s immediate response to that disabling sense of confusion
was to shift ground— invent new identities, constantly alter and
update his musical style, discover new ways to access his creativity,
keep himself and his observers guessing. “I change my mind a lot,”
he admitted. “I usually don’t agree with what I say very much. I’m
an awful liar.” To remain eternally fascinating, he had to change his
mind, and his story: from one interview to the next, he would be ca­
pable of delivering violently opposed, but devoutly sincere, explana­
tions of himself and his work. He learned how to invite or repel the
attentions of the media as the situation required: he would distance
himself from the commonplace duties of an entertainer promoting
himself and his product, but then treat the lucky few who were al­
lowed access as if they were not only close personal friends, but also
uniquely acute observers of his career. “That’s it, exactly!” he would
say when a journalist ventured a theory about a song or a change of
direction; the interviewer would leave with a glow of triumph, and
Bowie would survive with his mystique untouched.

Not just his mystique, but his “self”—which is what, ultimately,
makes David Bowie such a perfect exemplar of Wolfe’s “Me Decade.”
It was not that Bowie was preternaturally selfish, or arrogant, or
self-obsessed, or closeted, although (like every rock star) he could
be all those things. What gave Bowie his Me Decade was the fact
that, in the end, all of his creativity was focused on himself, just
as even the most outside-oriented of artists cannot help but reveal
themselves in their work. He set himself the task of exploring, quite
fearlessly, what it was to exist amid the turmoil of a culture that
was stumbling in search of a purpose and direction. By chronicling
his own perilous journey through the decade, he encapsulated the
spirit of the age, in all its anarchic disarray. His seventies was not
the decade of the political historian, charting the progression from
Wilson to Thatcher, or Nixon to Reagan; it was the decade of a sensi­
tive man caught in the midst of a psychodrama that became a public
spectacle, inspiring music that was as restless and creative as the man himself.

Bowie began his “long” seventies by trying to sell himself to the public, and ended it by canceling the sale. He was the man who sold himself to the world, and who sold the world an unrivaled vision of its own dreams, fears, and possibilities.