**Our Man of Alienation and Aliens**

Radio Elroy

The best manner to listen to the best of David Bowie, I would argue, is play his ten studio albums recorded in the seventies in reverse chronological order. We start with cutting edge avant-garde pop-rock and end with cosmology.

David Bowie sang about sex, drugs, rock ‘n’ roll, fame, glamor, excess, decadence, cosmology, aesthetics, alienation, aliens. He was the man who fell to earth, never crashing in the same car. More often than not you didn’t know what he was singing about but you knew it was important, profound, true, and about you, personally, as though he’d scanned your psyche, conscious and unconscious, and sought to offer a summary in four-four time with electric guitars. He said: you’re not alone.

Most rock ‘n’ roll acts never release a good album; those that do rarely release another. But for a ten-year stretch—some would argue longer—Bowie released album after album that did what hadn’t been done before. Initially, sometimes, we were baffled but repeated listenings would reveal that we had discovered a newly-created complex sub-genre, thrilling and evocative, often without identifiable progenitors.

He was an amalgam of guises and personas, an uber-magpie. He ran with his realization that art is not organic, inadvertent, spontaneous, uncontrived; his oeuvre is particularly artificial, deliberate. And for unknown reasons his art was bigger than the recordings. Bowie expanded into shaman and seer, poet-musician-clergy. His output—particularly his seventies albums, became an oblique liturgy, a prolonged holy text.

His first two albums were, by and large, juvenilia. One hit, “Space Oddity,” the song that made him famous. They are of interest to learn whence he came, but now sound somewhat trite. He was a kid—twenty in 1967, when he recorded and released his first album. A prodigy, to be sure, but not yet great. That would come very soon.

In 1970 he released *The Man Who Sold The World*-- the final album we will listen to in our ten-album cycle—which addresses the cosmos and whence it came and who might be its god, as does the book of Genesis. And then nine more studio albums released in the seventies, each intense and amazing, shocking in its originality, culminating with *Lodger*, 1979, the final album in his Berlin trilogy.

I’m not claiming that Bowie recorded nothing of value after the seventies. *Scary Monsters* and *Let’s Dance*, recorded in the early eighties, were strong. His cover of the Pixie’s “Cactus” on *Heathen* (2002) is brilliant/nasty—just libidinous and salacious enough. *Black Star*, his twenty-fifth studio album, released on his sixty-ninth birthday—two days before he died—has its moments. But as a rule it was gone. By and large his post-seventies recordings were tame, often lackluster, sometimes insipid. Relative to his seventies output they were small and ordinary.

Our survey of his seventies recordings will not be exhaustive. We will skip the album of covers (*Pin-ups*, 1973), the live albums (*David Live*, 1974; *Stage*, 1978; other), the compilation albums. Not that these are without interest, but this is a list of what is canonical only.

Bowie was an artistic polymath: he painted, he wore brazen stage costumes, he made music videos, he capably acted in films and on stage. Different fans seized on different aspects of his artistic output, but for me—while how he looked, how he moved, was not immaterial—Bowie was about music: vocals, lyrics, studio recordings, concerts. He was first and foremost an acoustic phenomenon. And that is our focus in the discussion below.

As we play our ten-album cycle, starting with *Lodger*, ending with *The Man Who Sold the World*, each album should be played in its ordinary order: side A then side B as those of us who hail from the era of vinyl would say. If you are listening on CD or iTunes skip the bonus tracks as will be discussed.

*Lodger,* 1979.

The final album in what is known as the Berlin Trilogy, his three-album collaboration with Brian Eno. *Lodger* is strong, strident, novel, weird, weird evolving to art and art to metaphysics. The better bits of this album explain its inclusion on in this holy list; the weaker bits explain why it is, chronologically, the last album of our ten-album cycle. It could be said that *Lodger* is the transition album between previous good and subsequent bad. The cover displays a photo of the deliberately ugly splayed form of Bowie, arms and legs akimbo, as though hastily mounted under glass.

“Fantastic Voyage.” The album opens, as do many of his albums (*Ziggy Stardust*, *Aladdin Sane*), with the weakest cut, a tepid take on nuclear war, but notable for a sonic vocal blast at 1:13-1:17; Bowie’s voice held, strong, full, resonant, defiant (repeated at 2:22-26).

“African Night Flight.” Nutty repetitive, driving, insistent. Album liner notes credit Eno as the Cricket Menace (you hear it, you know what it is). Nonsense (“Gotta getta word to Elizabeth’s father/Heigh ho he wished me well”) less successful than previous efforts (“The Supermen,” “The Bewlay Brothers”).

“Move On.” Built on chords from “All the Young Dudes” played backwards but it doesn’t quite work, overall kinda tepid but stay with me, it’ll be worth it. We are not yet into the realm of every-track-amazing Bowie albums; these will start soon as we move backward chronologically.

“Yassasin.” One of the few reggae-Turkish fusion songs in rock ‘n’ roll. You could dance to it (in a slow, jerky, formal manner), you could meditate to it. It doesn’t make sense but it makes sense that it doesn’t make sense. Who else could say “Look at this” and you’re convinced it’s profound?

“Red Sails.” Another travel song. “Boy you really get around.” Punchy but unremarkable.

“D.J.” The second single, after “Boys Keep Swinging,” off the album. Complex dissonance, but dissonance with inertia. “I am a DJ, I am what I play…I’ve got believers…”

“Look Back in Anger.” Named after the 1956 play by John Osborn. “Driven by the night.” Might be a motif for much of Bowiedom. Driven by the night, by theological curiosity, by beer and pharmaceutics beyond, by gonads.

“Boys Keep Swinging:” Some gayness “Other boys check you out…” but not too much. “Luck just kissed you hello when you’re a boy.” Bowie is the master of the sweet spot between dissonance/randomness and conventional art.

“Repetition.” The closest Bowie came to outright social commentary. Not his strong suit. But his entire oeuvre was social commentary. Maybe this is just a bit more overt than most. Too overt. Most of Bowie is so large and pluripotent that we make it into what we want. This seems pre-formed, small and fixed in shape.

“Red Money” The final cut on the original vinyl release. [[1]](#footnote-1) A reissue, essentially, of Iggy Pop’s “Sister Midnight” off Pop’s *The Idiot,* with different lyrics. “Then I got a small red box and I didn’t know what to do.” Technology with intimations of apocalypse.

*Heroes,*1977.

We go very quickly from merely very good to screaming/thunderous/brilliant.

Sometimes deliberately in-your-face dissonant.

*Heroes* was last album when Bowie’s nonsense was profound. “No one saw you hover over any freeways.”

“Beauty and the Beast.” We are somewhere new. We have not heard this before. We don’t even know the rules. “Slaughter in the air, protest in the wind.” What the hell is this song about? Thudding, driving. “I wanted no distractions.”

“Joe the Lion.” On the edge of intentional ugliness. “A couple of drinks on the house an’ he said tell you who you are if you nail me to my car. Boy, thanks for hesitating.” Fate and tragedy and art, large and so close as to make you wet with sweat and blood.

“Heroes.” Bowie’s final great single, his last great riff. Unrelated to his earlier songs. Simpler than previous genius. It is only marginally rock ‘n’ roll. Sentimental and grandiose. He sings it onstage in the film about junkies, *Christiane F*. (1981), Bowie playing Bowie, always his best role.

“And the cops shot over our heads.” Melodrama in the diffuse, lush, liquid, multilayered, Eno on suitcase synthesizer, Bowie working the primitive Solina String Ensemble synthesizer (a sampler, successor to the Mellotron) and the Chamberlin sampler, plus treated guitar by Fripp.

Grand, bittersweet, soaring, reaching, actually approaching upbeat; a wonderful slow build from calm tones to near desperation. The background chorus deliberately stupid.

Lyrics uncomplex don’t quite add up but don’t quite don’t.

“And the cops shot above our heads

And we kissed as though nothing could fall.”

“Sons of the Silent Age.” Like every song on this album an odd song, prose crammed together, the verse sad, reminiscing, lamenting. “Listen to Sam Therapy and King Dice.” The chorus a tad throwaway.

“Blackout.” Again a driving, insistent riff. I recall a radio ad for this album in 1979 and as usual the bit they aired was one of the less substantial bits from the album, that rushed bit ending with “my honor’s at stake.”

“V-2 Schneider.” Bowie was living in Berlin when he recorded this and as there will be 1984 imagery throughout *Diamond Dogs*, so is there WWII references throughout *Heroes.*

“Sense of Doubt.” Pure atmospherics. More Eno than Bowie one suspects. We’ve gotten very far from rock ‘n’ roll. It’s profound. Slow, cadenced, patient, church music. Textures in the background—wind and odd murmurings.

“Moss Garden.” Asian string plucking, jet noises, clickings/static. Insect chirps and a forlorn barking dog. Pure electronica. Again more Eno than Bowie.

“Neuköln.” A rather desolate piece, background music for a German expressionist film, with dissonant, dissolute sax.

“The Secret Life of Arabia.” Better without the Bowie lyrics/sung bit. A bit of fluff. Doesn’t quite come together. A warm-up. A rough draft. A dead end.

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*Low*, 1977

Its album cover photo a pun: Bowie in profile, recorded in Berlin, keeping a low profile.

“Speed of Life.” It is immediately apparent that we are great distance from *Station to Station*, the preceding album, in the direction of electronica. And where are the lyrics? *Low*, as with other albums, starts out with one of the weaker tracks. It’s a tad mushy. Not so very remarkable. Background music.

The album is not background music for long.

“Breaking Glass.” Stark, as jagged as its title, minimalist:

“Don’t look at the carpet

I threw something awful on it.”

It’s funny:

“You’re such a wonderful person

Butcha got problems.”

These are lovely lyrics actually. They are what someone might say, in the real world, were they succinct and accurate.

“What in the World.” We are still in the land of not his strongest. One senses an impending album release with still a track or two needing to be written and this knocked off to fill a space. I mean, it’s fine, but when you’re in the realm of scripture you’re ambitious.

“Sound and Vision.” Bowie liked this song a lot; it gave its title to a compilation album. It’s fine. Upbeat, pretty, modern, polished, even catchy.

“Always Crashing in the Same Car.” This track is large and profound. It intimates much and specifies nothing; “I was always lookin’ left and right…”

And this—recall—was the mid-70s, the era of the Bee Gees[[2]](#footnote-2), the toxic post-sixties fluffy vapor, bad hair and bad clothes. For something like this to emerge seemed finding an oasis of innovation and authenticity within a big world of cotton candy. Drums that smashed, intentional dissonance. You don’t know what it says, or you *do* know what it says but you can’t paraphrase it; you can only listen to the music and know with odd satisfaction. In our era the world’s poets and philosophers write rock ‘n’ roll songs.

“Be My Wife.” The album is hitting its stride. Guitar solos that are declarations of desire to commit mayhem. Then a verse that’s creepy-happy, particularly in contrast to the verse. Advice to the woman-listener of this song: don’t be his wife. It won’t turn out well.

“A New Career in a New Town.” An instrumental with a perfect title, phenomenally rare for an instrumental: It is all uncertainty, hesitancy, apprehension, with relentless pit-a-pat drum saying you must move forward. The chorus (if a song without vocals can be said to have a chorus) a bit zippy and trite in comparison, I suppose, but it doesn’t seem quite real, as convincing as the verse, which is melancholy, and says I’m afraid, I don’t know how this is going to turn out.

“Warszawa.” The first (in forward-going chronology) of the Eno album sides of instrumentals. This is symphonic, measured, formal, complex, wise. It is not rock ‘n’ roll but we have been away from rock ‘n’ roll for some time now. It alludes to insight, even epiphany. It is somehow specific. And at the end a little vocal bit, Gregorianesque, nonsense.

“Art Decade.” More electronica/symphonics. Slow, patient. We hear Eno more than Bowie in this. It’s good, it’s Bowiesque (new, without cliché, evocative) but not Bowie. Perhaps this is the part of the show where the vocalist/star goes off stage to catch a smoke and take a leak while the band entertains the crowd.

“Weeping Wall.” Now we are somewhere in Asia, with electric guitar solo, with fuzz. Again this is more contemplative than make-you-want-to-move-your-pelvis. This says: slow down and listen. Wait a while and be still.

“Subterraneans.” More orchestrals. It’s lovely, pure tones, at the end, a jazzesque sax solo, and you realize you’re in a bar, or in a bar in a movie, and it’s the end of the narrative. Whatever was going to happen has concluded, and if it doesn’t make sense now—and it doesn’t—it never will.

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*Station to Station*, 1976

This album perhaps represents the aural quality of cocaine.

“Station to Station.” Long, strident, odd, disjointed, unsupple. We hear a train, then feedback, then a thump, then two alternating tones a half-step apart, slow, methodical. Then an oddly formal, ritualistic motif, dissonant, spasms of feedback. Then a short sweet vocal solo then back to the main theme.

Again, it’s not rock ‘n’ roll as such. References to the Thin White Duke, a character about whom we can infer much.

“Once there were mountains…

It’s not the side effect of the cocaine…”

And speaking of cocaine, those who write about this album always note that those involved in its recording were snorting prodigious quantities of Vitamin C during its entire production.

“The European cannon is here.” What? Cannon or canon? Artillery or body of artistic works considered great, fundamental, and representative? Or the singer’s penis? (This last possibility give a new potential meaning to the Thin White Duke).

“I must be only one in a million.”

Bowie is many things but he is not the everyman. He is the singularity, the Man Who Fell to Earth.

“Golden Years.” A hit single, doo-wop, not so far from *Young Americans*, it’s catchy; you could dance to it, even, easily palatable.

“Nothing’s gonna touch you in these golden years.”

“Word On a Wing.” A soft ballad, a love song. Just when you think Bowie is a techno/edgy/gritty rocker he turns something like this out.

“In this age of grand illusion…”

“TVC15” Not the hit off the album—that was “Golden Years”—but this is my favorite cut on the album. Odd, upbeat, surreal.

“She’s my main feature.”

Ties into album theme of technology,

“My baby’s in there someplace, rotating in the sky”

“Transition, transmission, transition, transmission.”

And when the volume jumps up at 2:04 the track enlarges with a simple three-note bass pattern, to something cosmological.

Bowie’s dissonant counterpoint retarded slow sax in the background of the chorus. It’s large, vague, romantic. The collision of romance and technology, with a beat.

“Stay.” Killer opening riff. The best hard rock. With funk. Intimations of Blaxploitation. “‘Cause you can never really tell when somebody wants something you want too.”

“Wild Is the Wind.” Slow, long, romantic; an opportunity for DB to croon. Not real deep but we need a change to take a breath between intensities.

Only six songs total on the original vinyl release.

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*Young Americans*, 1975

It’s disco, it’s blue-eyed soul. Call me a child of the seventies but I think this albums holds up really well. It is a transition album, between rock and roll before and something else after.

Bowie’s prior album, *Diamond Dogs*, 1974, aside from the single “Rebel Rebel” didn’t get the airplay of his prior albums. But *Young Americans* had a big hit with the title track, and a bigger hit with “Fame,” co-written and performed with John Lennon and Carlos Alomar. (Radio stations never, ever play anything off “Young Americans” but the title cut and “Fame.”)

“Young Americans.” Just as “Changes” is not my favorite song on *Hunky Dory*, the title track and “Fame” on *Young Americans* are not my favorite cuts on *Young Americans.* Slick, sleek, none of the muddy production of “Watch That Man.”

Lyrics somewhere between sense and nonsense, but their very complexity suggests they’re not about nothing:

“Sit on your hands on the bus of survivors

Blushing at all the Afro-sheeners.”

For me the meat of the album is in the four consecutive songs on side A that immediately follow the title track, smooth blue-eyed soul: “Win,” “Fascination,” “Right,” and “Somebody Up There Likes Me.”

“Win.” Languid, oddly optimistic. “I say it’s hip to be alive.” Lyrics that look trite shorn of the music, but are profound in the context of the song.

Background singers: “It ain’t over”

Bowie: “Slow down let someone love you.”

“You never see me hanging naked and white.”

And a wonderful line, with an assumption:

“Someone like you

should not be allowed

to start any fires.”

--reminiscent of the line from Jimi Hendrix’ “Are You Experienced:”

“Not necessarily stoned

but beautiful.”

The assumption in the Bowie line is that some persons *should* be allowed to start fires; the assumption in the Hendrix line is that whoever (you, me, us) is/are *probably* stoned but not *necessarily* stoned. This is complex stuff for rock lyrics; more meaning packed into a small number of words than one finds in the usual tune.

“Fascination.” Frank disco. Also funk and jazz (and rock and pop), smooth; the black women and Bowie essentially dialoging, Bowie’s voice up and down, a deep growl then a high croon, all smooth,

“I know that people think that I’m a little crazy.”

“Right.” Liquid, again uber-smooth, catchy. “Never no turning back.” Possibly about nothing at all. Just a pure blast of cool/attitude/pose, an aesthetic ethos characterized by cool, any effort hidden. “Never been known to fail.”

Bowie, a saxophonist himself, is smart enough to call in a virtuoso, David Sanborn, to play sax saxophone on the album.

“Somebody Up There Likes Me.” A sustained mood with the prior songs, sax elegant and defiant, slow, wistful. Ordinary words become poetry when they say more than they say.

We are utterly confident in Bowie and his observations. He is an entirely reliable narrator, particularly on matters of cosmic sweep. Bowie can make large statements about the human race—our nature, our origins, our eventual fate—and you think, “Well, he would know.”

More high-grade nonsense. “Seventh son of a TV tube.”

“Across the Universe.” Possibly recorded because he was then hanging out with John Lennon. Not one of the stronger cuts on the album. The magic charisma, the bittersweet nostalgia of the original Beatles track is not enhanced; no other specific mood is attained. It is a Bowiesque cover but relative to the other tracks on this album it’s perfunctory.

“Can You Hear Me?” Soft, a little tepid relative to the other cuts. Pleasant enough but without the edge of “Win,” “Fascination,” “Right.”

“Fame.” A number one hit in its day, summer of ’75, Bowie’s biggest hit to date. Unapologetic disco. Call me out of synch but it’s never been one of my favorite cuts on the album. It’s better after drinking beer, when you’re dancing. John Lennon, co-writer of the track and back-up vocalist, was killed five years after its release, by fame.

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*Diamond Dogs*, 1974

Bowie as half man, half dog on the cover. A bit of backstory: Bowie wanted to convert Orwell’s *1984* into a sort of rock opera. Couldn’t get the rights. So the initial plan was abandoned but vestiges of the initial concept are sprinkled throughout the album.

“Future Legend.” Dramatic opening, an overture to the upcoming performance, with voiceover by Bowie, sci fi, apocalyptic, a sardonic reference to “Love Me Avenue” in a world where people hope for love but do not find it.

“Diamond Dogs.” The title track surprisingly, for a title track, not good. As is his wont it is early in the album, immediately following the spoken bit, “Future Legend.” It’s long, it never does very much. It feels little muddy (as does “Watch That Man” off *Aladdin Sane*, 1973) which we will hear next.

He says, towards the end, “Bow wow” and “Woof woof,” reminiscent of the spoken bits toward the end of the Beatles’ “Bulldog.”

“Sweet Thing.” Now the album becomes excellent. Actually “Sweet Thing” is part of a three-song cycle and tale: “Sweet Thing,” “Candidate,” then “Sweet Thing (Reprise),” no breaks in-between; it is essentially one long song in three sections.

“Sweet Thing” rambles, muses, builds insidiously; like all good poetry it never states exactly what it’s talking about. The long, complex, odd, moody track begins with rumbles and hints and intimations, then launches into a slow sort of ballad; Bowie is deep-voiced. The lyrics are complex: “Isn’t it me? Putting pain in a stranger.”

Then the “Candidate” section, with more electric guitar.

“I’ll make you a deal like any other candidate

You’ll pretend we’re walking home ‘cause your future’s at stake.”

It picks up, becomes faster, slowly building, increasingly frenetic. References to a hooker and perhaps this is what the whole three-song cycle is about.

“If you want it, boys, get it here then.”

“…tres butch little number wang say girlie I want you”

“…on the street where you live I could not hold up my head for I put all I had on another bed, on another floor, in the back of a car, in a cellar…”

“…buy some drugs and watch a band, jump in a river holding hands.”

Then “Sweet Thing (Reprise).” Slower, reflective. “Is it nice in your snowstorm?”—a reference to coke?

“It’s a street with a deal.”

Ending in an operatic vocal performance, Bowie holds a note, high and mournful and soulful, it’s so lovely and grand you forget it’s a song about a hooker, perhaps.

Then a bit of repetitive rock, primal, urgent, with distortion and feedback and relentless beat; it exists because when you hear it you don’t need to know why it exists; this a warm-up for a phenomenally successful bit of the same, the whole of the song “Chant of the Ever Circling Skeletal Family” which we will hear at the close of the album.

To say what it’s about would reduce it; it is better to say what it intimates, what you feel when you hear it. It is large, tragic, inevitable, cynical; a lovely tale with a sad conclusion, entirely convincing; whatever it is he’s saying we believe it.

“Rebel Rebel.” The hit single from the album. “Rebel Rebel” reminds us that for some years Bowie was capable of writing the perfect riff, the perfect pop-rock song. It is perhaps the best pure rock ‘n’ roll riff Bowie ever wrote, a dance song, radio pop, instantly appealing. It is, by Bowie standards: simple: simple riff, simple lyrics.

“You’ve got your mother in a whirl.

She’s not sure if you’re a boy or a girl.”

It’s actually rather positive:

“Hey babe your hair’s alright

Hey babe let’s go out tonight.”

And the plaintive protest of all adolescents: “How could they know?”

“Rock ‘n’ Roll With Me.” Written by someone else. Kinda tepid. Evidence that Bowie should stick to his own compositions. With some of the ballad, beer hall, schmaltzy feel of some of the cuts on *Aladdin Sane.*

“We Are the Dead.” I am amazed that this song is not famous. It’s fantastically evocative. Starting with simple keyboard and light drums, slow, then—a slow deliberate build, complex lyrics.

“They tell men son we want you, be elusive but don’t walk far

we’re breaking in the new boys…”

“…for the virgin king…”

“Because of all we’ve seen, because of all we’ve said, we are the dead.”

The verse is slow, poignant, subtle, delicate, relentless, a love song before a bad event.

“Heaven’s on the pillow.”

Who is “Baby Bankrupt?”

“It’s the theater of financiers, count them, fifteen ‘round the table, white and dressed to kill.” We don’t know what it’s about but it is nonetheless convincing, riveting, compassionate, horrific. We tangle into a knot of delicious and misery with a sense of impending doom. A new height of sublimity, subtle bittersweet nostalgia; delicate, nuanced.

“1984.” A remnant, as is the next song, of the initial concept for the album. Not so bad but not so great. A direction in which he should go no further. Possibly trying too hard, a rare impulse in the Bowie catalog.

Starts with ominous high-pitched alternating notes a half note apart, then goes into a seventies blaxploitation riff (he’d heard and liked the wacka-wacka guitar riff in “Shaft;” he wanted to be American and black) then the song proper. Strings, takes itself entirely seriously, it has, perhaps, aged more than most of Bowie’s songs from the seventies. Competent but unremarkable.

“Looking for the treason that I knew in ’65”—what? It doesn’t quite gel.

“Big Brother.” More from the *1984* concept. Fragmented as it is, the album doesn’t quite hold together as a concept.

“We’ll build a glass asylum

With just a hint of mayhem

…we’ll build a better whirlpool.”

A sort of trumpet—electronic trumpet?—solo, grand and tragic, vaguely Spanish. Then a dropped in different melody, ending with “Lord I’d take an overdose, if you knew what’s goin’ down.”

“Chant of the Ever Circling Skeletal Family.” “Big Brother” goes directly into this track, no break. It’s wild. Who but Bowie could sing, “Round up, eww eww,” and make us know that it’s important, imperative, we want to jerk back and forth, willing automatons. It’s a dance song, a work-out song, something so central and actual and true that you listen and ask no questions.

“Round up

Eww Eww

Shake it up shake it up

Move it up move it up.”

And it repeats, bringing in more instruments, it builds, it could go on for hours, but after two minutes it ends with a single repeated syllable, maybe bri or Brian or brain.

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*Aladdin Sane*, 1973.

Genius plus too many drugs. Reportedly described by Bowie as Ziggy goes to America. A flavor of bisexual/gothic horror/kitsch/sci-fi/camp, a cousin to *Rocky Horror.* Although the tone varies widely between songs, from bittersweet whimsy (“The Prettiest Star”) to coarse gritty urban cynicism (“Panic in Detroit”) the lyrics seem to comprise a single poem on the themes of otherworldliness and the past and the future and uncertainty and excess and loss and the odd link between glamor and annihilation.

The name of a city or cities follows each song title; most of the cities are in the US (excepting the Rolling Stones cover, and the title track, which is followed by Ellinis, the ocean liner on which he returned to Europe after the *Ziggy Stardust* tour).

“Watch That Man.” (New York). As with *Ziggy*, he starts out the album with one of the weakest cuts. The mix muddy from the get-go. Feels like fumes from the previous album, *Ziggy Stardust.*

“Aladdin Sane” (Ellinis). The title cut gets no airplay but there’s an odd subtlety to it. And the lyrics are, as with most of his better lyrics, are perfectly not sensical. “Just in case of sunrise.” A long piano solo by Mike Garson, an expansive jazzesque improvised frenzy, with a magic chord at 3:29, the transition between the long solo and the return to the chorus

“Drive-In Saturday” (Seattle-Phoenix). Doo wop nostalgia with sci-fi whooshes, “Try to get it on like once before… ” Dense lyrics diffusely suggestive, “It’s a crash course for the ravers.” Contemporary pop references (Twiggy, Jagger). Good-hearted, a little goofy.

“Panic in Detroit” (Detroit). A shift to a hard-edged rock song with a taut Bo Diddley beat. Cynical hard rock, simple coarse riff, black girl singers in the background. Proof that Bowie can write very hard rock very well. The apocalypse, dead cars, a city gone wrong, a city killed (“A trickle of strangers were all that were left alive”), with a lone wish, musing, soft after the calamity, powerful and forlorn because it’s small and quiet and honest, “I wish someone would phone.” An intimation of suicide: “A gun and me alone…let me collect dust.” Given the current obsession with apocalypse, Bowie’s focus on same seems prescient or at least ahead of his time.

“Cracked Actor.” (Los Angeles). No respite after the hard rock of “Panic in Detroit,” but a strident escalation: coarser, blunter, more dissonant. Drugs and sex as blatant as one hears in a rock song,

“Smack baby smack is all that you feel

Suck baby suck give me your head.”

About excess, decay; it is joyless; it is rather good rock ‘n’ roll but callow.

“Time.” (New Orleans). Has been termed Brechtian cabaret. Piano with echo. Drama, melodrama, melodrama so large it traipses close to the edge above the pit of failed, collapsed art; it totters but doesn’t fall in. Lyrics trite as lyrics alone but profound in the context of the song:

“And I think oh God I’m still alive

Should be home by now.”

We are outside the house of rock ‘n’ roll; this is theater, cabaret, show-tunes, opera, with electric guitar.

“The Prettiest Star.” (Gloucester Road). This track flirts with a 1920s sensibility (like McCartney’s “Honey Pie”). Again not rock ‘n’ roll but a song in a stage musical. An extension of his star fixation from *Ziggy Stardust.*

“Let’s Spend the Night Together.” A fun cover, very Bowie, fast. Mid-song it slows and quiets, then a fun spoken interlude:

“They said we were too young,

our kind of love was no fun.

But our love comes from above.

[Different voice:] Do it!

Let’s make love.”

“Jean Genie” (Detroit and New York). “Jean Genie” is a cousin to “Aladdin Sane” who is Ziggy Stardust a year older on the west side of the pond. A sprite, a nymph, an imp, a magician, a trickster. Word salad, references to drugs (“snow white”), the US (“New York’s a go-go”), urban modernism (“bites on the neon, sleeps in a capsule…”)

“Lives on his back” (like a prostitute?)

“Lady Grinning Soul” (London). The final cut on the album (said to be inspired by Claudia Lennear, an American soul singer) is again outside of rock ‘n’ roll; it is rather a sort of flamenco thing with over-the-top dramatic piano. Sex (“And when the clothes are strewn…”), drama, emotions in extremis.

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*The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, 1972

His greatest album. Not his largest album—large in a cosmological sense—that would be *The Man Who Sold the World*. But were Sgt. Pepper hosting a dinner party with The Joshua Tree and Pet Sounds and Born to Run and Exile on Main Street and Dark Side of the Moon, no one would look askance if Ziggy pulled a chair up to the table and started to nosh and gab.

An album so good it’s intimidating. An album so good I sometimes hesitate to listen to it. Like *Sgt. Pepper*, it is the best of the best, an unexplainable perfection.

It is more thematically linked than is *Sgt. Pepper*. The word or syllable “star” is in the title of four of its ten songs. It is about fame and glamour and larger issues too important to overtly specify; they are best addressed by rock ‘n’ roll music: guitars, vocals, all the better if you’re dancing to it.

Like physicists, rockers hit their apogee in their mid-twenties. Maybe this explains the existence of the 27 Club. Rockers sense *it’s not getting any better like it used to*; talents and judgment are furthered muddied by drugs which quickly escalate.

Bowie was twenty-five when *Ziggy* was recorded and released. At that time he was so oozing in talent that he could give away songs, as he gave “All the Young Dudes” to Mott the Hoople.

“Five Years.” Oddly—sagely?—he starts off with the weakest cut on the album. More commonly, less secure recording artists front-load their album with the better songs. “Five Years” is not bad, just ordinary. Were this album a novel (and to some extent it is) “Five Years” is the preamble you read quickly to get to the plot. It does serve the function of setting up the apocalyptic tone of the album.

“Soul Love.” Better, but still warming up. Charming, understated. Reminiscent of the whimsical, deft sound of the previous year’s *Hunky Dory*.

“Moonage Daydream.” David has landed. *No one* wrote songs like this in 1972. “Press your space face close to mine love.” Three minutes and fifty-two seconds of elegant, poignant, unprecedented rock and roll. A calling card from the monster in the antechamber.

“Star Man.” Like Gatsby, this theological encapsulation of the universe has charm to burn.

“There’s a star man waiting in the sky

He’d like to come and meet us but he thinks he’d blow our minds…

He’s told us not to blow it ‘cause he knows it’s all worthwhile.”

Amputated from the music, the lyrics can appear trite; heard in the context of the song they comprise philosophy, a credo.

“It Ain’t Easy.” Good, but on an album like this, “good” is sub-par. A rather Cro-Magnon chorus. A chance to take a breath between the thunderbolts of genius.

“Lady Stardust.” Nostalgia in the diffuse. Certainly autobiographical. “The boy in the bright blue jeans…. How I sighed when they asked if I knew his name.” In fact the whole song is nonsensical but no matter; sense is a trivial potato when you’re on a roll like this. Bowie doesn’t care about plot and sense; he is busy making audible the cosmos.

“Starman.” Stripped down bam-bam rock and roll. “I can make a transformation as a rock and roll star.” Hammy, dramatic, stage background chorus. Clean, ungimmicky. “I could fall asleep at night as a rock and roll star.” A languid outro which segues into—

“Hang On To Yourself.” Well frig! Have you ever danced to this? You *move.* The whole dance floor *moves.* The stolid are made kinetic, the spastic graceful, the undersexed horny, *now.* Sex blatant and raw. “We move like tigers on Vaseline.”

Half-note alterations as with the introduction to “All the Way From Memphis.”

“Ziggy Stardust.” As good as rock and roll can get. Hyperdense poetry,

ultimately tragic, every phrase exuding ambiguity, wonder, sex. An epic narrative arc ending as epic must, in tragedy. Formation, rise, demise, the arc of stardom. “He was the nazz, with godgiven ass, he took it all too far, but boy could he play guitar.”

Again, stripped of sound the lyrics can appear trite, even hackneyed; but in context you are made aware you are listening to the genesis of a sect.

“When the kids had killed the man

I had to break up the band.”

The pacing of “Ziggy Stardust” is slower, which is good, we need a breather from the dance floor after “Hang On To Yourself,” and we’re gonna have to dance again real soon because the next song is—

“Suffragette City.” The opening ascending rev-up guitars delivers us to a state of ongoing kinetic voom. In concerts everyone hollered in synchrony with him the naughty “WHAM BAM THANK YOU M’AM!”

Again, sense and narrative progression are not his primary concerns.

“She’s a total blam-blam…and then she…

Don’t lean on me man ‘cause you can’t afford the ticket.”

Horns and piano flesh this to symphonic complexity. This song can eat anything. A reference to *Clockwork Orange*. Nothing breaks the inertia. Somebody is clearly screwing somebody but the gender of participants and the exact nature of the act of lust, and the drugs involved are left unspecified.

“Rock ‘n’ Roll Suicide.” A requiem, a profound summation of the album. “Chev brakes are snarling.” A relentless build from a near-mumbled opening to an insistent holler: “You’re *not* alone!” All the while the stoned android background chorus sing plodding counterpoint and the overall effect is oddly comforting. He’s a rock star, he could say anything, and he tells you you’re not alone.

I will not defile this song by probing too deeply into its meaning. Let me only speculate that that song tells us that profundities exist and that for some of us, the finest aperture through which to watch the pinions of the world is rock ‘n’ roll.

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*Hunky Dory*, 1971.

A brilliant album, the world should have gone berserk in response. “Changes” got significant airplay; otherwise the album didn’t exist.

“Changes.” The hit off the album but as with “Fame” off *Young Americans* not one of my favorite cuts on the albums. It’s competent, professional pop but thin stuff relative to the subtleties to come.

“Oh You Pretty Things.” Now we enter into the meat of the album.

Eschewing two to four chord progressions that comprise the majority of rock ‘n’ roll.

“Crack in the sky and a hand reaching down to me

“A world to come

by the golden ones

written in pain, written in awe by a puzzled man who questioned what we were here for

And the chorus, robust, vigorous, simple

“Gotta make way for the Homo superior.”

“Look out I judge you not.” Bowie as God.

“Homo sapiens have outgrown their use.

Aliens: “The strangers have come today…”

“Eight Line Poem.” A languid respite between the brilliances.

“Life on Mars.” About which this commentator could write a book length analysis. Subtle, patient, building to the chorus, phrases. A complex, winding series of chord changes. Plaintive lyrics, possibly about a failed party, a family crisis, a failed friendship, failed dreams, a theater, a failed film, a fan, a dance hall fight, an action movie, failed Britannia.

“Look at those cave men go…”

“Mickey Mouse has grown up a cow” (profound here, trite when repeated in the song “Everything Zen,” by Bush).

“As I ask her to focus on sailors fighting in the dance hall

“…The best selling show”

And the enigmatic title question, “Is there life on Mars?” and if the answer yes then is Bowie a Martian, fallen to earth?

“Kooks.” Reportedly written after listening to the Canadian warbler Neil Young.

Sweet in the most favorable possible meaning of the word. Whimsy so whimsical it hurts. A love song from a proud father to his newborn son. Subtle, bittersweet.

“If you stay with us you gonna be pretty kooky too.”

And, “We believe in you.” What a wonderful thing to tell a son.

“Quicksand.” A breather amongst the astoundingnesses. Every song can’t be a brilliant symphony.

“Fill Your Heart.” The sole song not written by Bowie on the album. A throw-back to dance hall, big band days. A song which sets up:

“Andy Warhol.” Ohh this is very cool. Big fat hairy genius splat in the face.

Ominous near-random intro electronic keyboard under a recording studio’s conversation with Bowie sounding otherworldly, and/or stoned. Killer guitar riff with inertia to burn: intense, urgent, novel, cynical.

“Dress my friends up just for show, see them as they really are.”

A letter from a fan who is not a fan but perhaps really is but if this is your fan you have problems.

“Be a standing cinema”—more show biz talk.

One suspects that Bowie, at the time of writing this, liked Warhol but the affection came out at an oblique angle, via criticism, via envy, and for some reason resentment.

“Song for Bob Dylan:” A bit of ordinariness. Perhaps, to show his debt to the Unwashed Phenomenon, Bowie should have bought him a beer, or a joint, as opposed to writing this open letter of adulation. “Some words had truthful vengeance / That could pin us to the floor.”

Only Dylan can do Dylan; other people shouldn’t try.[[3]](#footnote-3)

“Queen Bitch.” Solid glam rock ‘n’ roll. A foretaste of *Ziggy Stardust*, recorded a year later.

“My weekend’s at an all time low…”

“The Bewlay Brothers.” If this commentator could write a book-length discussion of “Life on Mars,” he could retire from ordinary pursuits and ponder the meanings of this track for all of retirement until his demise at which point certain metaphysical questions would be answered.

The song was a touchstone for Bowie: he named his music publishing company Bewlay Bros. Music in the late seventies. Was Terry, Bowie’s brother with schizophrenia, the other Bewlay Brother?

There is a hierarchy of meaning, perhaps, with, at the bottom, meaningless nonsense—nonsense intimating nothing. Just random or ill chosen words. Above that: sense. Cogent thought expressed clearly. Above that: poetry, that is, prose condensed and both lovely and evocative. But the highest level of meaning, this commentator would propose, is high-grade nonsense; evocative nonsense. It is able to convey notions and sensations we cannot specify. It is large in a way we more feel than realize; it is satisfying in a place we cannot define. We can only marvel at the process; we do not understand it; we cannot specify what is occurring, only that this high-grade nonsense is worthy of being listened to repeatedly. We like what it does to us, but when pressed for an explanation, we can only say, Listen to it yourself, and see if it happens to you too.

“The Bewlay Brothers” means nothing overtly but every line, every phrase advances the inertia of the song. If beauty were a blunt instrument, by the end of “Bewlay Brothers” you would be knocked dumb and motionless on the floor. We hear oblique intimations of love and youth and loss and the cosmos and all of history and our eventual fate.

“Our wings that barked…”

“We were so turned on by your lack of conclusions.”

“The solid book we wrote cannot be found today.”

“It was stalking time for the moonboys, the Bewlay Brothers.”

Stalking time for the moonboys? *It works.*

Some words for the joy of their sound (but it’s never just sound): of his brother:

“He’s chameleon, comedian, Corinthian and caricature.” Dylanesque density, a slurry of meaning. Bowie just riffing on/stimming on the words, their sounds, their connotations, fuck grammar. Akin to the Cobain/Nirvana lyrics from “Smells Like Teen Spirit:”

“A mulatto, an albino, a mosquito, my libido.” Sounds and connotations, a one-two punch, one to your ear and gut, one to your mind. As with the best of art in any genre it is impervious to paraphrase.

“And the world was asleep to our latent fuss.”

And it ends with a bit of herky jerky simplistic children’s rhyme, Bowie’s voice distorted by varispeeding:

“Please slip away ay, just for the day ay.” Creepy in its simplicity.

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*The Man Who Sold the World*, (1970 in US, 1971 in the UK)

We move from generally acoustic *Hunky Dory* to heavy metal, even acid rock, interspersed with songs so subtle and poignant you almost wince at the intensity.

“The Width of a Circle.” Heavy metal, far from the first two albums which were mostly mush.[[4]](#footnote-4) Immediately we discuss theology and the origins of the universe. “I realized that God’s a young man too,” sings Bowie, not unlike me, Bowie, unformed, looking for self-definition, testing his powers, trying to find the limit of just how remarkable he is. Then “God did take my logic for a ride.” Bowie is having a one-on-one conversation with the cosmos. We can’t make sense of it all. “You’ll never go down to the gods again.” Ending with a sort of cataclysmic chorus, ahhs from the hereafter.

“All the Madmen.” Charming, subtle, soft, then a section that shows off his burgeoning vocal skills—“to the faaaaaar side of town.” Then, “I will do me harm.” He is god in the first song, he is crazy for thinking he’s god in the second cut, but maybe he’s only crazy because he’s so very creative or the other way around, it isn’t clear. And his whole pack, his social scene, they take them away too. Drug abuse (Librium [a benzodiazepine, in the same family as Valium and Xanax]), self-harm, persecution, all packed into this song.

“Black Country Rock.” “Pack a pack horse and rest up here…” Aren’t pack horses an American thing? Well he did pick his nom de stage from an American western hero and/or his eponymous knife. This was the era when Elton John recorded *Tumbleweed Connection* (also 1970) so maybe Brit rockers had a thing then for the Wild West. A pleasant enough tune, a rest between the intensities.

“After All.” Slow, patient, gently ominous, dolorous. “They’re just taller children, that’s all, after all.” A bit of interjected circus/child’s song was his wont in this era.

“Running Gun Blues.” A near-unique item in the Bowie catalog, an overt political song. About Vietnam. Strong tune but lyrics a tad too overt to be really good.

“Savior Machine.” Political commentary; commentary on technology. “President Joe once had a dream.” The smartest machine ever is made. “Its answer was law.” Now Bowie is the smartest machine ever made, which becomes bored, and says (sings) “Please don’t believe in me, please disagree with me / You can’t stake your lives on a savior machine.” It could be said that Bowie, here and later, had mixed feelings about technology.[[5]](#footnote-5)

“She Shook Me Cold.” Again hard rock, even heavy metal, approaching acid rock, a song about sex and nothing else. “She sucked my dormant will, Mother, she blew my brain.” In any rock song containing, in two adjacent lines, the words “sucked” and “blew,” we are not talking about wills and brains.

“The Man Who Sold the World.” A planet-sized song, a song that is *particularly* unique, a song without preamble or successor, a song creating its own genre: rock ‘n’ roll/ calypso/bossanova/sci-fi/apocalypse, so smooth as to be disorienting. Bowie’s ambition is maximal. He endeavors to write scripture. He endeavors to redefine what should be included as sacred writing. Not for nothing did Nirvana, then on top of the rock ‘n’ roll universe, cover this.

A ratcheting gúiro gives it a Latin vibe, then ascending scales, with thumping chords on organ giving a whiff of circus music—*but it holds together.* “I searched for form and land.” Bowie is not swinging for the long ball; rather he is trying to design a new ball park and metropolis and the universe in which it is situated.

“The Supermen.” The final song in our ten-album cycle. I’ve always been skeptical of philosophers and purveyors of metaphysics but listening to Bowie—lyrics and music, guitar and drums—I sense I know whose hand swirls the stars. It isn’t Bowie, but Bowie knows who it is, and is about to tell us.

“The Supermen” is so very ludicrously over the top—he sprints past reasonable rock ‘n’ roll, he races through kitsch and enters somewhere new—he runs to the end of the precipice and jumps—*but does not fall*—but kind of hovers for the duration of the song and all the references to God seems less whacky.

The track is said to be influenced by the writings of Nietzsche and H.P. Lovecraft and German Romanticism but it doesn’t matter whence it came; those writers were at most a starting point for a song that expands endlessly. It doesn’t make sense—small sense, ordinary sense—but it makes big sense—sense you feel in your solar plexus. The background chorus sounds like big ancient singing stone heads, unspeakably wise, discussing a state of cosmological completion.

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Radio Elroy

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1. I will not discuss the “bonus tracks;” only the songs on the original vinyl releases.

   The bonus tracks are not without value, but were tacked on for commercial reasons, to enhance the sales of the CDs (an effective strategy: this commentator purchased every CD despite owning all Bowie albums in vinyl). But the Mona Lisa is not improved by nailing a painting of flowers to one edge, even were the addition painted by Leonardo himself. For the purposes of this discussion—an appreciation of the ten albums, forming as they do an operatic cycle, an epic novel, an encyclopedia addressing aesthetics and cosmology and myriad other topics—these bonus cuts are best left to one side. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I am not anti-Bee Gees. Some of their hits, e.g., “Stayin’ Alive,” have held up very well. But they recorded a lot of fluff, and their fluff was popular. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As a rule you should not cover a Dylan song unless you’re Jimi Hendrix. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *David Bowie*, (1967); *Space Oddity* (1969). Mostly anecdotes, tales set to light, poppy music. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Nick Bostrom, Swedish philosopher, *Superintelligence*, Oxford University Press, 2014, favorably blurbed by Bill Gates among others, on the downside of the potential emergence of computers smarter than man. Bowie was way ahead of the curve on this one. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)