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The Personas of David Bowie



Explore a timeline of the David Bowie's early albums
and the iconic personas tied to each one

Sources

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Davy Jones



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In 1962, Bowie formed his first band at the age of 15, named the Konrads. Playing guitar-based rock and roll at local youth gatherings and weddings, the Konrads had a varying line-up of between four and eight members, Underwood among them. When Bowie left the technical school the following year, he informed his parents of his intention to become a pop star. His mother arranged his employment as an electrician's mate. Frustrated by his bandmates' limited aspirations, Bowie left the Konrads and joined another band, the King Bees. He wrote to the newly successful washing-machine entrepreneur John Bloom inviting him to "do for us what Brian Epstein has done for the Beatles—and make another million." Bloom did not respond to the offer, but his referral to Dick James's partner Leslie Conn led to Bowie's first personal management contract.

Conn quickly began to promote Bowie. The singer's debut single, "Liza Jane", credited to Davie Jones with the King Bees, was not commercially successful. Dissatisfied with the King Bees and their repertoire of Howlin' Wolf and Willie Dixon covers, Bowie quit the band less than a month later to join the Manish Boys, another blues outfit, who incorporated folk and soul—"I used to dream of being their Mick Jagger", Bowie was to recall. Their cover of Bobby Bland's "I Pity the Fool" was no more successful than "Liza Jane", and Bowie soon moved on again to join the Lower Third, a blues trio strongly influenced by The Who. "You've Got a Habit of Leaving" fared no better, signalling the end of Conn's contract. Declaring that he would exit the pop music world "to study mime at Sadler's Wells", Bowie nevertheless remained with the Lower Third. His new manager, Ralph Horton, later instrumental in his transition to solo artist, soon witnessed Bowie's move to yet another group, the Buzz, yielding the singer's fifth unsuccessful single release, "Do Anything You Say". While with the Buzz, Bowie also joined the Riot Squad; their recordings, which included one of Bowie's original songs and material by The Velvet Underground, went unreleased. Kenneth Pitt, introduced by Horton, took over as Bowie's manager.

Dissatisfied with his stage name as Davy (and Davie) Jones, which in the mid-1960s invited confusion with Davy Jones of The Monkees, Bowie renamed himself after the 19th-century American pioneer James Bowie and the knife he had popularised. His April 1967 solo single, "The Laughing Gnome", using speeded-up thus high-pitched vocals, failed to chart. Released six weeks later, his album debut, *David Bowie*, an amalgam of pop, psychedelia, and music hall, met the same fate. It was his last release for two years.

The Personas of David Bowie

Major Tom

Davy Jones

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In "Space Oddity", from the album *David Bowie* (1969, later retitled *Space Oddity*), Major Tom's departure from Earth is successful and everything goes according to plan. At a certain point during the travel ('past one hundred thousand miles'), he claims that "he feels very still" and thinks that "my spaceship knows which way to go" and proceeds to say "Tell my wife I love her very much." Control then informs him, "Ground Control to Major Tom: your circuit's dead, there's something wrong" and attempts to reestablish contact with Major Tom. Tom's final words in the song (possibly not heard by Ground Control) are: "Here am I floating 'round my tin can, far above the moon. Planet Earth is blue, and there's nothing I can do."

In the promotional film from 1969, David Bowie plays as Major Tom, Ground Control (GC), and the Countdown Announcer. When the lyrics "And the stars look very different today" are said, two lovely women appear, portraying either angels or aliens, or perhaps both. The moment "Though I'm past one hundred thousand miles, I'm feeling very still" are said, the two women can be seen removing Major Tom's helmet and spacesuit. Later a still fully outfitted Major Tom can be seen spinning around in space, with a panicked Ground Control attempting to contact him; the spinning Major Tom is either the reality of the situation, or Ground Control's imagination. The music video ends with Major Tom sitting in his tin can, far above the world, with the two women by his side in a ménage à trois style.

Bowie created a sequel entitled "Ashes to Ashes" (1980). The song, which peaked at Number 1 in the UK music charts and had a respectable showing in other international music charts, was featured on his LP *Scary Monsters (And Super Creeps)*. The song actually says little about Major Tom, except to call him a "junkie," slang for a person with a heroin addiction or other compulsive habit. The context of the lyrics seems to indicate that the song is mainly about Bowie's own soul searching, rather than a literal continuation of the Major Tom story. There is an inclusion saying "strung out in heaven's high, hitting an all time low" referring to him getting high on cocaine, while his life is low. Given Bowie's own history of drug problems, it is quite possible that the "Major Tom" line could also be autobiographical.

Alternatively, the song can be interpreted to provide detailed information on Tom's story. The song refers an event happening much later, after "Space Oddity." Ground control receives a message from the "Action Man," referring to Tom, and he says "I've loved all I've needed to love. Sordid details following...". He talks about how the shrieking of nothing is killing him, how all he has are his pictures of women to keep him company, and how he now has neither money nor hair. He wants to kick the habit but the planet is "glowing;" essentially he cannot quit whatever is influencing him—and killing him—because the feeling is too pleasurable and addictive. The exact source of the influence is not defined. The later verses seem to reflect more on Bowie's literal battle with addiction, specifically about wanting to stay clean but being stuck with a "valuable friend." The song again refers directly to Tom toward the end, where he has become more of a legend, but not for his heroics. He has become a nursery rhyme in the minds of the public, with mothers warning against drug use by telling their children if they want "to get things done, you'd better not mess with Major Tom."

Bowie released a song entitled "Hallo Spaceboy" on his album *Outside* (1995). While this song itself does not directly reference Major Tom, references to Major Tom do appear in the remixed version that Bowie released with the Pet Shop Boys in 1996. This remix contains lyrics from "Space Oddity" that are sung by Pet Shop Boys vocalist Neil Tennant.

Although never mentioned in the song, an astronaut, possibly Major Tom, does make an appearance in the music video for the song "Slow Burn" on Bowie's 2002 album *Heathen*.

In the music video of Bowie's 2015 song "Blackstar" (on the album of the same name, released in 2016 two days prior to the artist's death), a dead astronaut is depicted. His skull is retrieved by an alien female who takes it back to what could be considered a cult which subsequently worships the relic. This astronaut was speculated to be a depiction of Major Tom's final fate. Video director Johan Renck said on a BBC documentary "to me, it was 100% Major Tom."

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Ziggy Stardust

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Dressed in a striking costume, his hair dyed reddish-brown, Bowie launched his Ziggy Stardust stage show with the Spiders from Mars—Ronson, Bolder, and Woodmansey—at the Toby Jug pub in Tolworth in Kingston upon Thames on 10 February 1972. The show was hugely popular, catapulting him to stardom as he toured the UK over the next six months and creating, as described by Buckley, a "cult of Bowie" that was "unique—its influence lasted longer and has been more creative than perhaps almost any other force within pop fandom." The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars (1972), combining the hard rock elements of *The Man Who Sold the World* with the lighter experimental rock and pop of *Hunky Dory*, was released in June. "Starman", issued as an April single ahead of the album, was to cement Bowie's UK breakthrough: both single and album charted rapidly following his July Top of the Pops performance of the song. The album, which remained in the chart for two years, was soon joined there by the 6-month-old *Hunky Dory*. At the same time the non-album single "John, I'm Only Dancing", and "All the Young Dudes", a song he wrote and produced for Mott the Hoople, were successful in the UK. The Ziggy Stardust Tour continued to the United States.

The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars (often shortened to *Ziggy Stardust*) is the fifth studio album by English musician David Bowie, released on 16 June 1972 in the United Kingdom. It was produced by Bowie and Ken Scott and features contributions from the Spiders from Mars, Bowie's backing band — composed of Mick Ronson, Trevor Bolder and Mick Woodmansey. The album was recorded in Trident Studios, London, like his previous album, *Hunky Dory*. Most of the album was recorded in November 1971 with further sessions in January and early February 1972.

Described as a rock opera and also a loose concept album, *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* is about Bowie's titular alter ego Ziggy Stardust, a fictional androgynous bisexual rock star who acts as a messenger for extraterrestrial beings. The character was retained for the subsequent Ziggy Stardust Tour through the United Kingdom, Japan and North America. The album, and the character of Ziggy Stardust, were influenced by glam rock and explored themes of sexual exploration and social taboos. A concert film of the same name, directed by D. A. Pennebaker, was recorded in 1973 and released a decade later.

The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars peaked at number five on the UK Albums Chart and number 75 in the US Billboard Top LPs & Tape chart. As of January 2016 it had sold 7.5 million copies worldwide. The album received widespread critical acclaim. In 2017, it was selected for preservation in the National Recording Registry, being deemed "culturally, historically, or artistically significant" by the Library of Congress.

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Aladdin Sane

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Aladdin Sane is the sixth studio album by English musician David Bowie, released by RCA Records on 13 April 1973. The follow-up to his breakthrough *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, it was the first album he wrote and released from a position of stardom.

NME editors Roy Carr and Charles Shaar Murray called the album "oddly unsatisfying, considerably less than the sum of the parts", while Bowie encyclopedist Nicholas Pegg describes it as "one of the most urgent, compelling and essential" of his releases. The Rolling Stone review by Ben Gerson pronounced it "less manic than *The Man Who Sold The World*, and less intimate than *Hunky Dory*, with none of its attacks of self-doubt." The album cover featuring a lightning bolt across his face is regarded as one of Bowie's most iconic images.

In 2003, the album was ranked among six Bowie entries on Rolling Stone's list of the 500 greatest albums of all time (at #277), and 279 in a 2012 revised list. It was later ranked No. 77 on Pitchfork Media's list of the top 100 albums of the 1970s.

The name of the album is a pun on "A Lad Insane". An early variation was "Love Aladdin Vein", which David Bowie dropped partly because of its drug connotations. Although technically a new Bowie 'character', Aladdin Sane was essentially a development of Ziggy Stardust in his appearance and persona, as evidenced on the cover by Brian Duffy and in Bowie's live performances throughout 1973 that culminated in Ziggy's 'retirement' at the Hammersmith Odeon in July that year. Lacking the thematic flow found on its predecessor, Aladdin Sane was described by Bowie himself as simply "Ziggy goes to America"; most of the tracks were observations he composed on the road during his Ziggy Stardust Tour, which accounted for the place names following each song title on the original record labels. Biographer Christopher Sandford believed the album showed that Bowie "was simultaneously appalled and fixated by America".

His mixed feelings about the journey stemmed, in Bowie's words, from "wanting to be up on the stage performing my songs, but on the other hand not really wanting to be on those buses with all those strange people ... So Aladdin Sane was split down the middle." This kind of "schizophrenia", as Bowie described it, was conveyed on the cover by his makeup, where a lightning bolt represents the duality of mind, although he would later tell friends that the "lad insane" of the album's title track was inspired by his brother Terry, who had been diagnosed as a schizophrenic. Bowie himself came up with the idea of the lightning bolt over his face, but said the teardrop was Brian Duffy's idea: "He [Brian] put on that afterward, just popped it in there. I thought it was rather sweet." Regarded as one of the most iconic images of Bowie, it was called "the Mona Lisa of album covers" by Mick McCann writing for *The Guardian*.

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Diamond Dogs is the eighth studio album by the English musician David Bowie, released on 24 May 1974 by RCA Records. Thematically, it was a marriage of the novel Nineteen Eighty-Four by George Orwell and Bowie's own glam-tinged vision of a post-apocalyptic world. Bowie had wanted to make a theatrical production of Orwell's book and began writing material after completing sessions for his 1973 album Pin Ups, but the author's estate denied the rights. The songs wound up on the second half of Diamond Dogs instead where, as the titles indicated, the Nineteen Eighty-Four theme was prominent. The album is ranked number 995 in All-Time Top 1000 Albums (3rd edition, 2000) and number 447 in NME's The 500 Greatest Albums of All Time.

Though the album was recorded and released after the 'retirement' of Ziggy Stardust in mid-1973, and featured its own lead character in Halloween Jack ("a real cool cat" who lives in the decaying "Hunger City"), Ziggy was seen to be still very much alive in Diamond Dogs, as evident from Bowie's haircut on the cover and the glam-trash style of the first single "Rebel Rebel". As was the case with some songs on Aladdin Sane, the influence of the Rolling Stones was also evident, particularly in the chugging title-track. Elsewhere, however, Bowie had moved on from his earlier work with the epic song suite, "Sweet Thing"/"Candidate"/"Sweet Thing (Reprise)", whilst "Rock 'n' Roll with Me" and the Shaft-inspired wah-wah guitar style of "1984" provided a foretaste of Bowie's next, 'plastic soul', phase. The original vinyl album ended with a juddering refrain Bruh/bruh/bruh/bruh/bruh, the first syllable of "(Big) Brother", repeats incessantly. "Sweet Thing" was Bowie's first try at William S. Burroughs' cut-up style of writing, which Bowie would continue to use for the next 25 years.

Although Diamond Dogs was the first Bowie album since 1969 to not feature any of the Spiders from Mars, the backing band made famous by Ziggy Stardust, many of the arrangements were already worked out and played on tour with Mick Ronson prior to the studio recordings, including "1984" and "Rebel Rebel". In the studio, however, Herbie Flowers played bass with drums being shared between Aynsley Dunbar and Tony Newman. In a move that surprised some commentators, Bowie himself took on the lead guitar role previously held by Ronson, producing what NME critics Roy Carr and Charles Shaar Murray described as a "scratchy, raucous, semi-amateurish sound that gave the album much of its characteristic flavour". Diamond Dogs was also a milestone in Bowie's career as it reunited him with Tony Visconti, who provided string arrangements and helped mix the album at his own studio in London. Visconti would go on to co-produce much of Bowie's work for the rest of the decade.

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Thin White Duke



The Thin White Duke was the persona and character of English musician David Bowie during 1975 and 1976. He is primarily identified with Bowie's 1976 album *Station to Station* and is mentioned by name in the title track. However, Bowie had begun to adopt the "Duke" persona during the preceding *Young Americans* tour and promotion in 1975. The persona's look and character are somewhat based on Thomas Jerome Newton, the titular humanoid alien played by Bowie in the 1976 film *The Man Who Fell to Earth*.

The Thin White Duke was a controversial figure due to ostensibly pro-fascist statements made by Bowie in press interviews during this period. Soon after making the comments, Bowie claimed that they were "theatrical" remarks made in character and did not reflect his actual views. In later years, he blamed his erratic behaviour during his mid-1970s Duke era on an "astronomical" use of hard drugs (particularly cocaine) while living in Los Angeles.

Sources

At first glance, the Thin White Duke appeared more conventional than Bowie's previously flamboyant glam incarnations. Sporting well-groomed blonde hair and wearing a simple, cabaret-style wardrobe consisting of a white shirt, black trousers, and a waistcoat, the Duke was a hollow man who sang songs of romance with an agonised intensity while feeling nothing, "ice masquerading as fire". The persona has been described as "a mad aristocrat", "an amoral zombie", and "an emotionless Aryan superman". Bowie himself described the character as "A very Aryan, fascist type; a would-be romantic with absolutely no emotion at all but who spouted a lot of neo-romance."

The Thin White Duke was a controversial figure. While being interviewed in the persona in 1975 and 1976, Bowie made statements about Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany that some interpreted as expressing sympathy for fascism or even promoting fascism. The controversy deepened in May 1976 when, while acknowledging a group of fans outside of London Victoria station, he was photographed making what some alleged to be a Nazi salute. Bowie denied this, saying that he was simply waving and the photographer captured his image mid-wave.

As early as 1976, Bowie began disavowing his allegedly pro-fascist comments and said that he was misunderstood. In an interview that year in the *Daily Express*, he explained that while performing in his various characters, "I'm Pierrot. I'm Everyman. What I'm doing is theatre, and only theatre... What you see on stage isn't sinister. It's pure clown. I'm using myself as a canvas and trying to paint the truth of our time on it. The white face, the baggy pants - they're Pierrot, the eternal clown putting over the great sadness." In 1977 (after retiring the Duke), Bowie stated that "I have made my two or three glib, theatrical observations on English society and the only thing I can now counter with is to state that I am NOT a Fascist".

In later years, Bowie called the period from about late 1974 until early 1977 "the darkest days of my life" due to "astronomical" usage of cocaine and other drugs. He blamed his offensive statements, erratic behavior, and fascination with Nazi and occult symbols during that time on his precarious mental state, and claimed that he could not even remember the late-1975 recording sessions for *Station to Station*. "It was a dangerous period for me," he explained. "I was at the end of my tether physically and emotionally and had serious doubts about my sanity." He also began to see the Thin White Duke as "a nasty character indeed", and later, "an ogre".

In an attempt to salvage his mental and physical health, Bowie left the drug-fueled social scene of Los Angeles in 1976, moving first to Geneva, Switzerland, before joining his friend Iggy Pop in West Berlin in early 1977. Though he did not publicly retire the Thin White Duke as he had Ziggy Stardust, Bowie did not appear in the persona after settling in Europe.

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