

David Bowie vs Alexander McQueen

FASHION - FEATURE

We revisit a 1996 Dazed head-to-head between Alexander McQueen and David Bowie in the wake of the icon's death

Text Dazed Digital

January 13th 2016

In the mid-90s, Britpop ruled music. But while most were looking back with laddish vigour to the Kinks, Stones or Beatles, the best British designer of his generation was saluting a more difficult idol. Bowie was returning with a series of typically prophetic, violent and glamorous albums - dressed, of course, in Lee Alexander McQueen's designs. For the 26th issue of *Dazed & Confused*, the two titans of British youth culture interviewed each other, accompanied by a special photoshoot styled by Katy England and shot by Karen Perronet-Miller of his clothes. The interview was conducted in 1996, the year McQueen was appointed head designer at Givenchy - something he discusses towards the end of this conversation. Following Bowie's death earlier this week, we revisit this head-to-head between two of Britain's finest creative minds. Over to you David...

This conversation took place on the phone, as is always the case with my conversations with Alex. We have worked together for over a year on various projects and never once met. It's a beautiful Sunday afternoon and he is in the verdant green hills of Gloucestershire visiting at the house of his friend, Isabella Blow. Ringing, ringing, ringing.

David Bowie: Are you gay and do you take drugs? (laughs)

Alexander McQueen: Yes, to both of them. (more laughter)

David Bowie: So what are your drugs of choice?

Alexander McQueen: A man called Charlie!

David Bowie: Do you find that it affects the way you approach your designing?

Alexander McQueen: Yeah, it makes it more erratic. That's why you get my head blown up shot. (In reference to a Nick Knight photograph at the Florence Biennale.)

David Bowie: Well I once asked you to make me a specific jacket in a certain colour and you sent me something entirely different in a tapestry fabric, quite beautiful I might add, but how would you cope in the more corporate world?

Alexander McQueen: I wouldn't be in a corporate world.

David Bowie: Even if you're going to be working for a rather large fashion house like Givenchy?

Alexander McQueen: Yeah.

David Bowie: So how are you going to work in these circumstances? Do you feel as though you're going to have rules and parameters placed on you, or what?

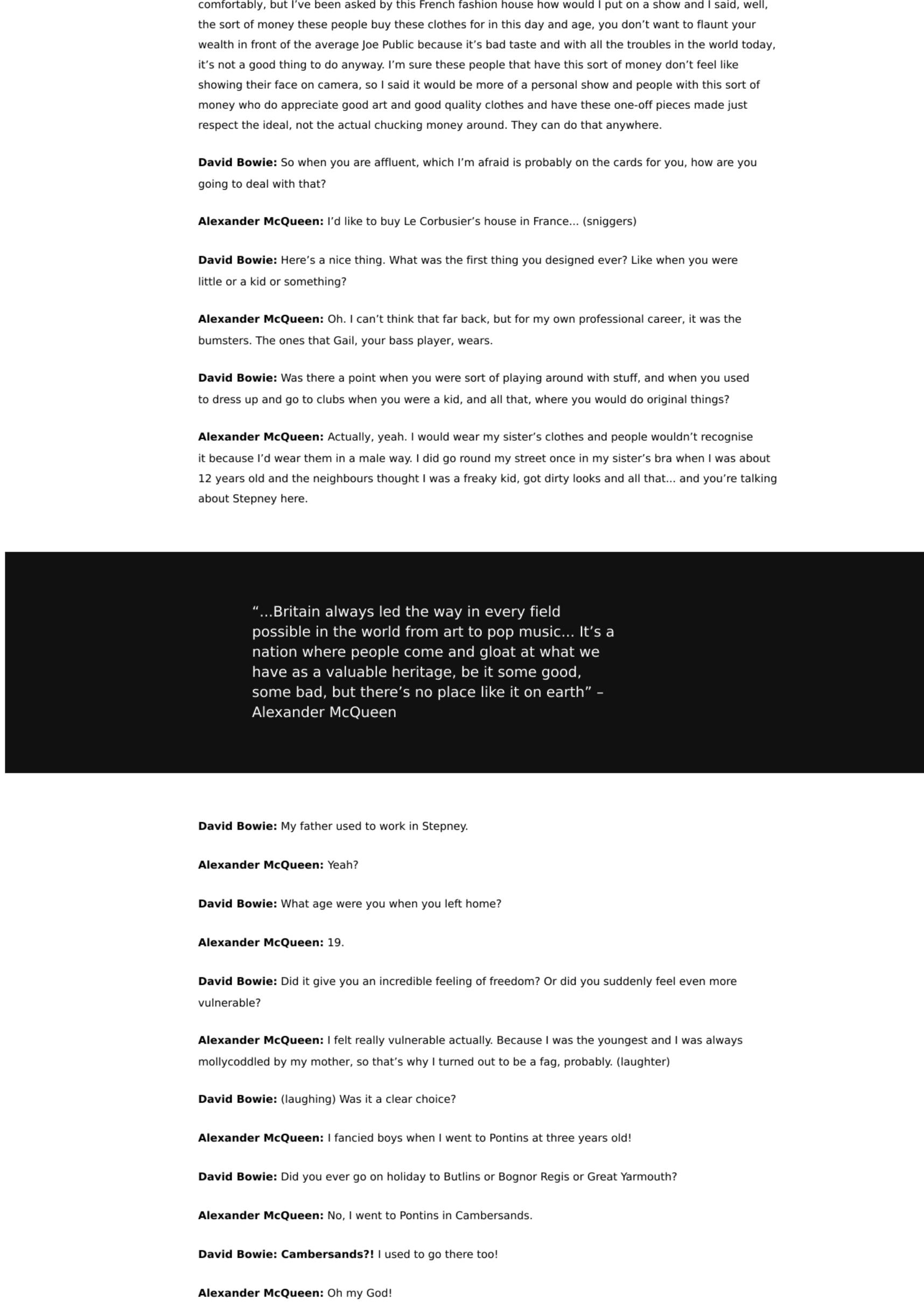
Alexander McQueen: Well, yeah, but you know I can only do it the way I do it. That's why they chose me and if they can't accept that, they'll have to get someone else. They're going to have no choice at the end of the day because I work to my own laws and requirements, not anyone else's. I sound a bit like yourself!

David Bowie: Armani or Versace?

Alexander McQueen: Marks and Spencer.

David Bowie: Unlike most designers, your sense of wear seems to derive from forms other than fashion history. You take or steer quite arbitrarily from, say the neo-Catholic macabre photographs of Joel-Peter Witkin, to rave culture. Do you think fashion is art?

Alexander McQueen: No I don't. But, I like to break down barriers. It's not a specific way of thinking, it's just what's in my mind at the time. It could be anything - it could be a man walking down the street or a nuclear bomb going off - it could be anything that triggers some sort of emotion in my mind. I mean, I see everything in a world of art in one way or another. How people do things. The way people kiss.



BOWIE: ARMANI OR VERSACE? MCQUEEN: MARKS AND SPENCER.

BRITISH DESIGNER OF THE YEAR ALEXANDER MCQUEEN IN CONVERSATION WITH DAVID BOWIE TURN TO PAGE 45

Photography Karen Perronet-Miller, fashion Katy England, taken from issue 26 of *Dazed & Confused*, 1996

David Bowie: Who or what are your present influences?

Alexander McQueen: Let me think. I don't know. I think that's a really hard question because in one way, one side of me is kind of really sombre and the other side of my brain is very erratic and it's always this fight against the other and I choose so many different things. This is why my shows always throw people completely: one minute I see a lovely chiffon dress and the next minute I see a girl in this cage that makes her walk like a puppet and, you know, they can't understand where it's coming from because there are so many sides of me in conflict. But influences are really from my own imagination and not many come from direct sources. They usually come from a lone force of say, the way I want to perform sex or, what would happen if a person was like that. You know what I mean? It's not from direct sources. It's just sort of from a big subconscious or the universe. I don't think like the average person on the street. I think quite perversely sometimes in my own mind.

David Bowie: Yeah, I would say, from just looking at the way you work, that sexuality plays a very important part in the way that you design.

Alexander McQueen: Well, because I think it's the worst mental attitude. Sexuality in a person trying to define one's sexuality. Finding which way you sway or what shocks you in other people and who accepts you at the end of the day when you're looking for love. You have to go through these corridors and it can be kind of mind-blowing sometimes.

David Bowie: There's something a lot more pagan about your work compared, say, to Gaultier. Your things work at a more organic level.

Alexander McQueen: Possibly. I gather some influence from the Marquis de Sade because I actually think of him as a great philosopher and a man of his time, where people found him just a pervert. (laughs) I find him sort of influential in the way he provokes people's thoughts. It kind of scares me. That's the way I think but, at the end of the day, that's the way my entity has grown and, all in all, in my life, it's the way I am.

David Bowie: Do you think of clothes themselves as being a way of torturing society?

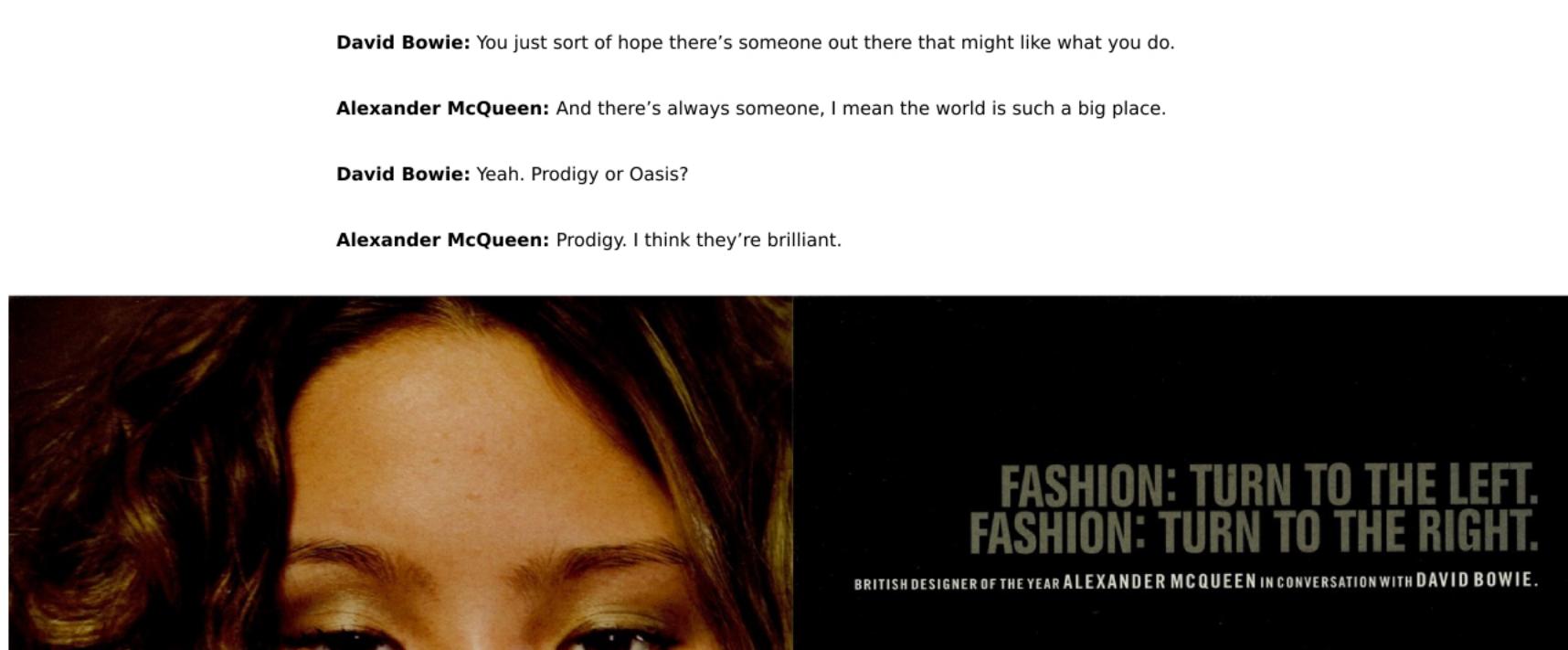
Alexander McQueen: I don't put such an importance on clothes, anyway. I mean at the end of the day they are, after all, just clothes and I can't cure the world of illness with clothes. I just try to make the person that's wearing them feel more confident in themselves because I am so unconfident. I'm really insecure in a lot of ways and I suppose my confidence comes out in the clothes I design anyway. I'm very insecure as a person.

David Bowie: Aren't we all? Could you design a car?

Alexander McQueen: Could it? It would be as flat as an envelope if I designed a car.

David Bowie: Could you design a house?

Alexander McQueen: Yes, very easily. Very easily.



"This is why my shows always throw people completely: one minute I see a lovely chiffon dress and the next minute I see a girl in this cage that makes her walk like a puppet..." - Alexander McQueen

David Bowie: Do you paint or sculpt?

Alexander McQueen: No. I buy sculptures. I don't do it. I buy it. I buy lots of sculptures.

David Bowie: Do you ever work in the visual arts?

Alexander McQueen: No, but I just did a show the other day. I don't know if you heard, but we did this show, it was on water and we did this kind of cocoon for this girl made of steel rods and it was in the form of a three dimensional star and it was covered in this glass fabric so you could see through it and this girl was inside it, but we had all these butterflies flying around her inside it. So she was picking them out of the air and they were landing on her hand. It was just about the girl's own environment. So I was thinking about the new millennium in the future thinking you would carry around with you your home like a small world. She was walking along in the water with a massive star covered in glass and the butterflies and death-faced moths were flying around her and landing on her hand and she was looking at them. It was really beautiful. It threw a lot of people completely sideways.

David Bowie: It's interesting how what you're talking about, is somewhere between theatre and installation.

Alexander McQueen: Well, I hate the theatre. I hate it. I used to work in the theatre. I used to make costumes for them and films, and it's one thing I've always detested - the theatre. I hate going to the theatre. It bores me shitless.

David Bowie: Well, I'm not talking about a play.

Alexander McQueen: I know, but I just wanted to tell you that anyway! (laughs)

David Bowie: All right, change the word to ritual.

Alexander McQueen: Yeah, that's better. I like ritual... (laughs)

David Bowie: Armani says, "Fashion is dead".

Alexander McQueen: Oh, so is he... I mean, God...

David Bowie: Now you sound like Versace...

Alexander McQueen: He's close to dead. I mean, no one wants to wear a floppy suit in a nice wool - the man was a bloody window dresser. What does he know?

David Bowie: Do you think that what he's really saying is that maybe...

Alexander McQueen: He's lost it...

David Bowie: He might still be making an observation in as much as the boundaries are coming down...

Alexander McQueen: Yeah.

"This is why my shows always throw people completely: one minute I see a lovely chiffon dress and the next minute I see a girl in this cage that makes her walk like a puppet..." - Alexander McQueen

David Bowie: My father used to work in Stepney.

Alexander McQueen: Yeah.

David Bowie: What age were you when you left home?

Alexander McQueen: 19.

David Bowie: Did it give you an incredible feeling of freedom? Or did you suddenly feel even more vulnerable?

Alexander McQueen: I felt really vulnerable actually. Because I was the youngest and I was always mollycoddled by my mother, so that's why I turned out to be a fag, probably. (laughs)

David Bowie: (laughing) Was it a clear choice?

Alexander McQueen: I gathered some influence from the Marquis de Sade because I actually think of him as a great philosopher and a man of his time, where people found him just a pervert. (laughs)

David Bowie: I mean, no one wants to wear a floppy suit in a nice wool - the man was a bloody window dresser. What does he know?

David Bowie: Do you think that what he's really saying is that maybe...

Alexander McQueen: He's lost it...

David Bowie: He might still be making an observation in as much as the boundaries are coming down...

Alexander McQueen: Yeah.

"This is why my shows always throw people completely: one minute I see a lovely chiffon dress and the next minute I see a girl in this cage that makes her walk like a puppet..." - Alexander McQueen

David Bowie: Who would you like to buy Le Corbusier's house in France... (sniggers)

Alexander McQueen: Oh God, I'm open for libel here now, David...

David Bowie: Just sort of hope there's someone out there that might like what you do.

Alexander McQueen: Prodigy. (laughs)

David Bowie: Well it does draw one's attention back to your clothes and what you do is actually more important than anything else.

Alexander McQueen: I mean, no one wants to wear a floppy suit in a nice wool - the man was a bloody window dresser. What does he know?

David Bowie: Do you enjoy collaboration?

Alexander McQueen: I did. I mean I like to work with other people, but I don't necessarily respect them. I mean, I like to work with other people, but I don't necessarily respect them.

David Bowie: Well, I hate the theatre. I hate it. I used to work in the theatre. I used to make costumes for them and films, and it's one thing I've always detested - the theatre. I hate going to the theatre. It bores me shitless.

David Bowie: Well, I'm not talking about a play.

Alexander McQueen: I know, but I just wanted to tell you that anyway! (laughs)

David Bowie: All right, change the word to ritual.

Alexander McQueen: Yeah, that's better. I like ritual... (laughs)

David Bowie: Armani says, "Fashion is dead".

Alexander McQueen: Oh, so is he... I mean, God...

David Bowie: Now you sound like Versace...

Alexander McQueen: He's close to dead. I mean, no one wants to wear a floppy suit in a nice wool - the man was a bloody window dresser. What does he know?

David Bowie: Do you think that what he's really saying is that maybe...

Alexander McQueen: He's lost it...

David Bowie: He might still be making an observation in as much as the boundaries are coming down...

Alexander McQueen: Yeah.

"...Britain always led the way in every field possible in the world from art to pop music... It's a nation where people come and gloat at what we have as a valuable heritage, be it some good, some bad, but there's no place like it on earth" - Alexander McQueen

David Bowie: Who would you like to buy Le Corbusier's house in France... (sniggers)

Alexander McQueen: Oh God, I'm open for libel here now, David...

David Bowie: Just sort of hope there's someone out there that might like what you do.

Alexander McQueen: Prodigy. (laughs)

David Bowie: Well it does draw one's attention back to your clothes and what you do is actually more important than anything else.

Alexander McQueen: I mean, no one wants to wear a floppy suit in a nice wool - the man was a bloody window dresser. What does he know?

David Bowie: Do you enjoy collaboration?

Alexander McQueen: I did. I mean I like to work with other people, but I don't necessarily respect them.

David Bowie: Well, I hate the theatre. I hate it. I used to work in the theatre. I used to make costumes for them and films, and it's one thing I've always detested - the theatre. I hate going to the theatre. It bores me shitless.

David Bowie: Well, I'm not talking about a play.

Alexander McQueen: I know, but I just wanted to tell you that anyway! (laughs)

David Bowie: All right, change

