



## 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 looking a more difficult idol — **David Bowie** was returning with a series of typically prophetic, violent and glamorous albums — dressed, of course, in **Leo 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 **Karenza Peterson-Miller**, of his clothes. The interview was conducted in 1996, the year McQueen was appointed head designer at **Gaultier** — 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? (laughter)

**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 steal 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.



Photography: Karenza Peterson-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 the way I want people to perform sex or the way I want to see people act, 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 perverse. 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 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 want 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 I? It would be as fat 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 snail would. 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...

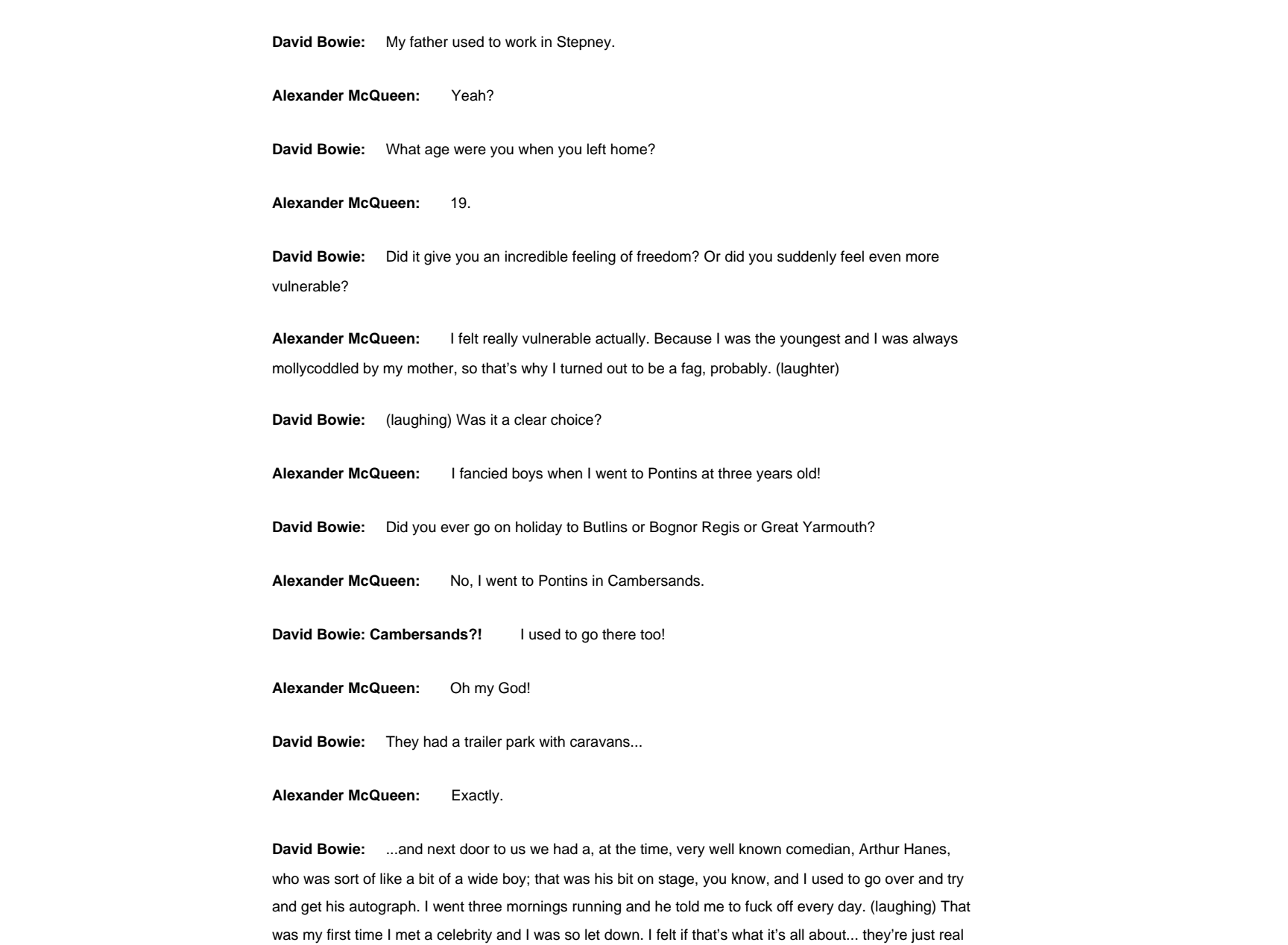
**Alexander McQueen:** He's close to dead. I mean, no one wants to wear a floppy suit in a nice wool — the man was a bloody window dresser. What does he know?

**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.



Photography: Karenza Peterson-Miller, fashion: Katy England, taken from issue 26 of Dazed & Confused, 1996

**David Bowie:** The way fashion is presented these days is a quantum leap from how it was presented say, five to ten years ago. It's become almost a new form, hasn't it?

**Alexander McQueen:** Yeah, but you know you can't depend on fashion designers to predict the future of society, you know, at the end of the day they're only clothes and that never strays from my mind for one minute.

**David Bowie:** Is the British renaissance a reality or a hype do you think? The world is being told that it's so. Through all strata of British life and from fashion to visual arts, music, obviously, architecture, I mean there's not one aspect of culture where Brits haven't got some pretty fair leaders. English designers in French houses, you know what I mean? It's like we're pervading the whole zeitgeist at the moment.

**Alexander McQueen:** Being British yourself, I think you understand that Britain always led the way in every field possible in the world from art to pop music. Even from the days of Henry VIII. 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.

**David Bowie:** But why is it we can't follow through once we've initially created something? We're far better innovators than we are manufacturers.

**Alexander McQueen:** Yeah, exactly. But I think that's a good thing. I don't think that's a bad thing. It makes you holy, it makes you quite respectable about what you do and the actual money-making part of it is for the greedy.

**David Bowie:** So you're not greedy, Alex?

**Alexander McQueen:** I'm afraid I'm not. Money's never been a big object. Well, I mean I like to live comfortably, but I've been asked by this French fashion house how would I put on a show and I said, well, the sort of money these people buy these clothes for in this day and age, you don't want to flaunt your wealth in front of the average Joe Public because it's bad taste and with all the troubles in the world today, it's not a good thing to do anyway. I'm sure these people that have this sort of money don't feel like showing their face on camera, so I said it would be more of a personal show and people with this sort of money who do appreciate good art and good quality clothes and have these one-off pieces made just respect the ideal, not the actual chucking money around. They can do that anywhere.

**David Bowie:** So when you are affluent, which I'm afraid is probably on the cards for you, how are you going to deal with that?

**Alexander McQueen:** I'd like to buy Le Corbusier's house in France... (sniggers)

**David Bowie:** Here's a nice thing. What was the first thing you designed ever? Like when you were little or a kid or something?

**Alexander McQueen:** Oh, I can't think that far back, but for my own professional career, it was the bustmers. The ones that Gail, your bass player, wears.

**David Bowie:** Was there a point when you were a kid, and all that, where you would do original things?

**Alexander McQueen:** Actually, yeah. I would wear my sister's clothes and people wouldn't recognise it because I'd wear them in a male way. I did go round my street once in my sister's bra when I was about 12 years old and the neighbours thought I was a freaky kid, got dirty looks and all that... and you're talking about Steptey here.

"...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:** My father used to work in Steptey.

**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 tag, probably. (laughter)

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

**Alexander McQueen:** I fancied boys from Pontins at three years old!

**David Bowie:** Did you ever go on holiday to Bultins or Bognor Regis or Great Yarmouth?

**Alexander McQueen:** No, I went to Pontins in Camberlands.

**David Bowie:** Camberlands?! I used to go there too!

**Alexander McQueen:** Oh my God!

**David Bowie:** They had a trailer park with caravans...

**Alexander McQueen:** Exactly.

**David Bowie:** ...and next door to us we had a, at the time, very well known comedian, Arnie Hanes, who was sort of like a bit of a wide boy; that was his bit on stage, you know, and I used to go over and try and get his autograph. I went three mornings running and he told me to fuck off every day. (laughing) That was my first time I met a celebrity and I was so let down. I felt if that's what it's all about... they're just real people.

**Alexander McQueen:** Two memories on Pontins — one, was coming round the corner and seeing my two sisters getting off with two men, (laughter) I thought they were getting raped and I went screaming back to my Mum and I wound up getting beat up by my two sisters! The other one was turning up in Pontins when we first got there and looking out the cab window 'cos my family was, like, full of cabbies; it was like a gypsy caravan-load to go to these places, and I looked out the window when I got there and there were these two men with these scary masked faces on and I shit myself there and then in the cab I literally just shit my pants! (laughter)



Photography: Karenza Peterson-Miller, fashion: Katy England, taken from issue 26 of Dazed & Confused, 1996

**David Bowie:** Which comes to... who is the stiffest designer?

**Alexander McQueen:** Oh my God...

**David Bowie:** Who is the worst designer?

**Alexander McQueen:** In my eyes?

**David Bowie:** Yeah, in your eyes.

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

**David Bowie:** Do you think there's more than one?

**Alexander McQueen:** I think you've got to blame the public that buy the clothes of these people, not the designers themselves because it turns out they haven't got much idea about, you know, design itself. It's the people that buy the stuff. My favourite designer, though, is Rei Kawakubo. She's the only one I buy, the only clothes I buy ever for myself as a designer are Comme des Garçons. I spent about a thousand pounds last year (I shouldn't say that) on Comme des Garçons menswear...

**David Bowie:** I've never paid, Alex! (laughs) Until...

**Alexander McQueen:** Until you met me! (more laughter)

**David Bowie:** Until I met you? Yes, but I knew that you needed it!

**Alexander McQueen:** I did at the time! But I tell you what I did do when you paid me, I paid the people that actually made the coat!

**David Bowie:** No, listen, you were so kind about the couple of things that I didn't need that you actually gave me. I thought that was very sweet of you. You work very well in a collaborative way as well. I thought the stuff...

**Alexander McQueen:** I still haven't bloody met you yet! (laughs)

**David Bowie:** I know, I think it's quite extraordinary that we've done so well with the stage things that we put together. Do you enjoy collaboration?

**Alexander McQueen:** I do, but the one thing you have to do when you collaborate is actually respect the people that you work with; and people have phoned me up and asked me to collaborate with them before and I've usually turned them down.

**David Bowie:** Do your clients really know what they want and what is right for them, or do you usually have to dress them from the floor up?

**Alexander McQueen:** It can work either way and I don't resent either because, at the end of the day, I'm the clothes designer and they are the public. If you want a house built you're not expected to build it yourself.

**David Bowie:** Here's a fan question. Who would you like to dress more than anyone else in the world and why?

**Alexander McQueen:** There's no-one I'd like to dress more than anyone else in the world. I'm afraid. I can't think of anyone who deserves such a privilege! (laughs)

**David Bowie:** The sub-headline there! (laughs)

**Alexander McQueen:** Oh my God no, 'cos I'm an atheist and an anti-royalist, so why would I put anyone on a pedestal?

**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:** Well, I think it would limit your lifestyle somewhat if you said your music is just for that person down the road.

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

**Alexander McQueen:** And there's always someone, I mean the world is such a big place.

**David Bowie:** Yeah. Prodigy or Oasis?

**Alexander McQueen:** Prodigy. I think they're brilliant.



David Bowie: Interview: Alexander McQueen, taken from issue 26 of Dazed & Confused, 1996. Taken from issue 26 of Dazed & Confused, 1996

**David Bowie:** Well, you haven't answered this one. I have to drag you out on this one, Armani or Versace? (laughs)



Alexander McQueen: Marks and Spencer. I'm sorry, I don't see the relevance of the two of them put together. Actually, they should have amalgamated and sort of formed one company out of both. If you can imagine the rhinestones on one of them deconstructed suits...

David Bowie: What do you eat?

Alexander McQueen: What do I eat?

David Bowie: Yeah.

Alexander McQueen: Well, I've just had a guinea fowl today... it was quite an occasion to come here... It's such a lovely place and I love to come here. Bryan Ferry comes here a lot. It's an amazing place and it was built in the Arts and Crafts Movement by Isabella's husband's grandfather. It's on a hill in Gloucestershire and it overlooks Wales and everything. And my bedroom is decorated with Burne-Jones' Primavera tapestry – I always come here to get away.

David Bowie: So this is your sanctuary is it?

Alexander McQueen: Yes, it is. Very much so.

David Bowie: Did you ever have an affair with anyone famous?

Alexander McQueen: Not famous, but from a very rich family. Very rich Parisian family.

David Bowie: Did you find it an easy relationship, or was it filled with conflicts?

Alexander McQueen: No, it: he was the most wonderful person I have ever met and I was completely honest with him. Never hushed my background or where I came from, and this was when I was only 19 or 20, I went out with him and I said to him whatever we do, we do it Dutch and he didn't understand what I said. He thought it was a form of sexual technique! Going Dutch!! (laughs) I said it means paying for each of us separately. He thought it that was great, but he gave the best blow job ever! (laughter)

David Bowie: How royal! Was it old money or was it industrial wealth?

Alexander McQueen: Long time industrial aristocratic wealth.

David Bowie: Do you go abroad very much? I mean just for yourself, not for work?

Alexander McQueen: No, not really.

David Bowie: So you really are happy in your home grown environment?

Alexander McQueen: I like London, but I love Scotland! I'd never been to Aberdeen before and I went to see Murray's friends in Aberdeen for the first time and it was unreal because I stepped off the plane and I just felt like I belonged there. It's very rare that I do that because I have been to most places in the world, like most capital cities in Japan and America, and you feel very hostile when you step off the plane in these places. I stepped off the plane in Aberdeen and I felt like I've lived there all my life. And it's a really weird sensation. I like more of the Highlands. My family originated from Skye.

David Bowie: Are you a good friend, a stand up guy, or a flake?

Alexander McQueen: I'm afraid I have very few friends and I think that all of the friends I have, I can depend on and they can depend on me. I don't have hangers-on, and I'm very aggressive to people that if I read through 'em in a second, they've usually found the wrong person to deal with. So if you have got me as a friend, you've got me for life. And I'd do anything for them, but I don't really have associates that use me or abuse me, unless I ask them to! (laughs)

David Bowie: Are you excited about taking over at Givenchy?

Alexander McQueen: I am and I'm not. To me, I'm sort of saving a sinking ship and not because of John Galiano, but because of the house. It doesn't really seem to know where it's going at the moment and, at the end of the day, they've got to depend on great clothes, not the great name.

David Bowie: Have you already formulated a kind of direction you want to take them?

Alexander McQueen: Yeah, I have.

David Bowie: Is it exciting?

Alexander McQueen: Yeah it is, because the philosophy is mainly based on someone I really respected in fashion. There's a certain way fashion should go for a house of that stature, not McQueen bumsters, I'm afraid.

David Bowie: My last question. Will you have time to be making my clothes for next year's tour? (laughs)

Alexander McQueen: Yeah, I will. We should get together. I mean, I want to see you this time.

David Bowie: We could put this on the record right now... are you going to make it over here for the VH-1 Fashion Awards? I can't remember.

Alexander McQueen: When is it?

David Bowie: October 24th or something...

Alexander McQueen: My fashion show is on the 22nd.

David Bowie: So you're probably not going to make it. 'Cos you know I am wearing the Union jacket on that. Because millions of people deserve to see it.

Alexander McQueen: You've got to say, 'This is by McQueen!' (laughs)

David Bowie: Gail will be wearing all her clobber as well.

Alexander McQueen: Oh, she's a flake!

David Bowie: Oh, she wears it so well.

Alexander McQueen: I'd love to do your tour clothes for you again.

David Bowie: Oh, well that's great. I can't wait to be properly fitted up this time!

Alexander McQueen: Yeah, definitely. But I've got to see you. I don't want wrist measurements over the phone, 'cos I'm sure you lie about their length! (laughs)

David Bowie: No, not at all...

Alexander McQueen: 'cos you know some people lie about their length! (laughs)

David Bowie: I just said I'd never lie about the inside leg measurement.

Alexander McQueen: What side do you dress David, left or right? (laughs)

David Bowie: Both!

Alexander McQueen: Yeah, right.

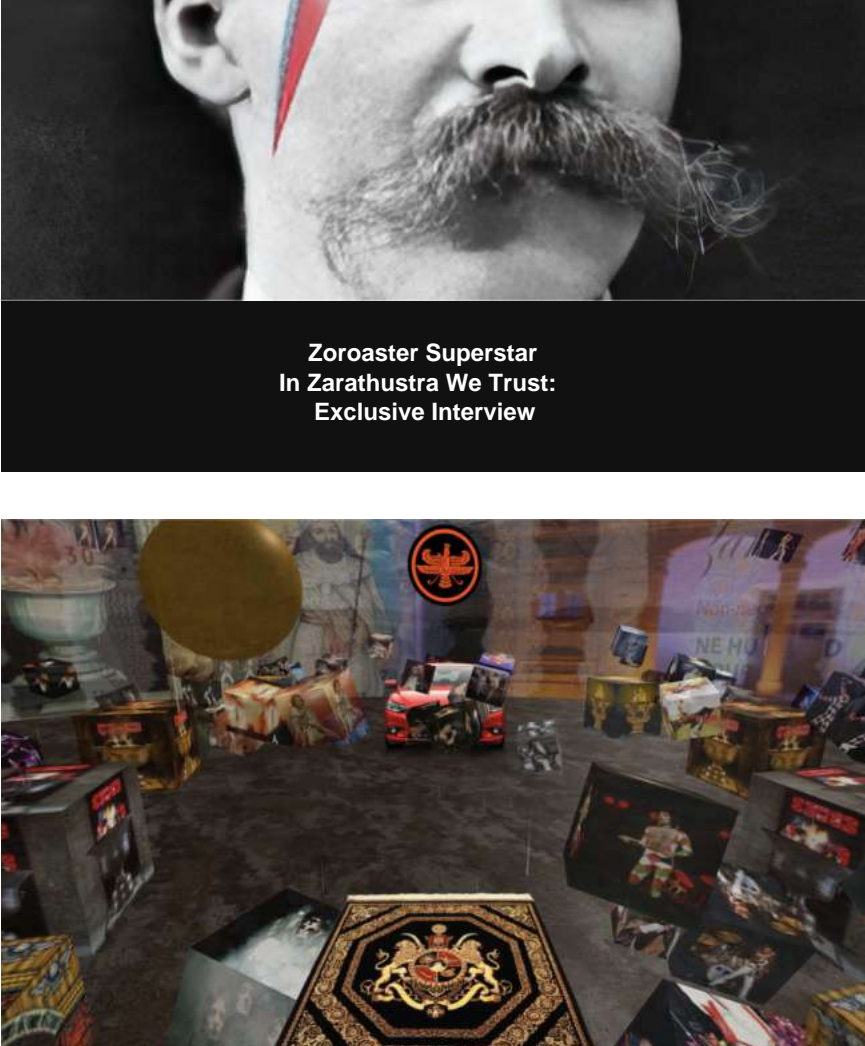
David Bowie: No. Yes. Well, maybe.



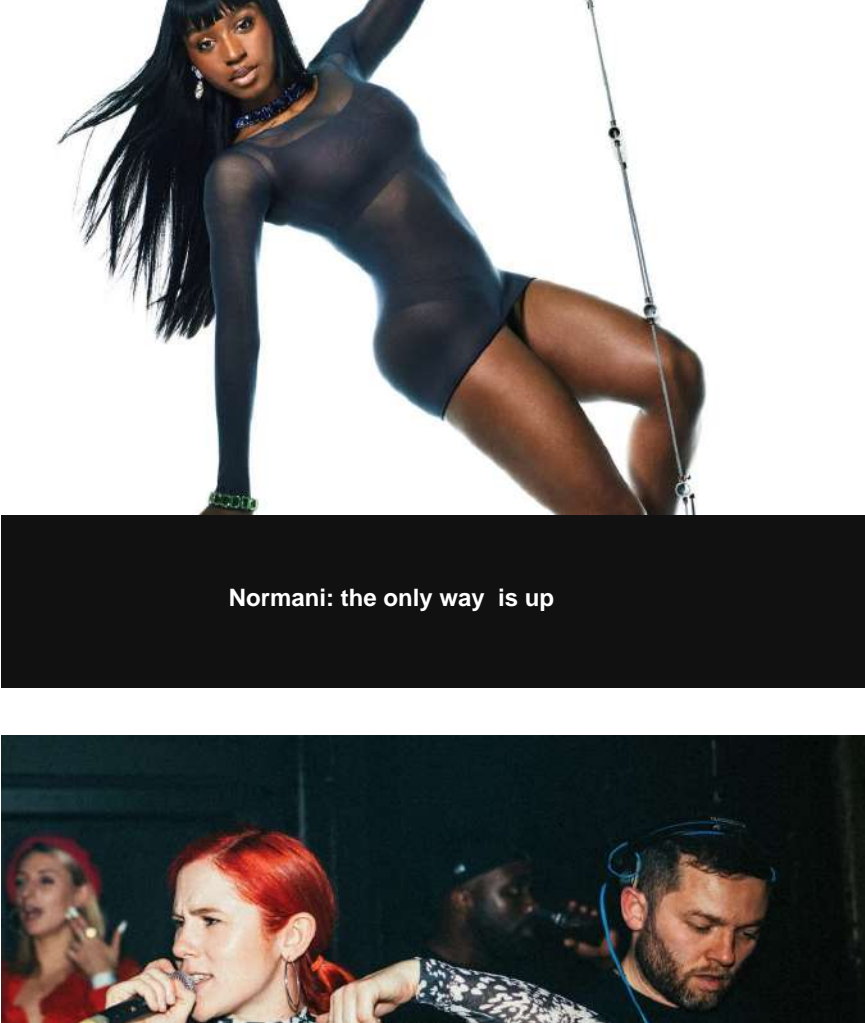
David Bowie interviews Alexander McQueen, taken from issue 29 of Dazed & Confused, 1996

- FASHIONFEATURELONGREADHEAD TO HEADDAVID BOWIE
- ALEXANDER MCQUEENINTERVIEWJOEL-PETER WITKIN

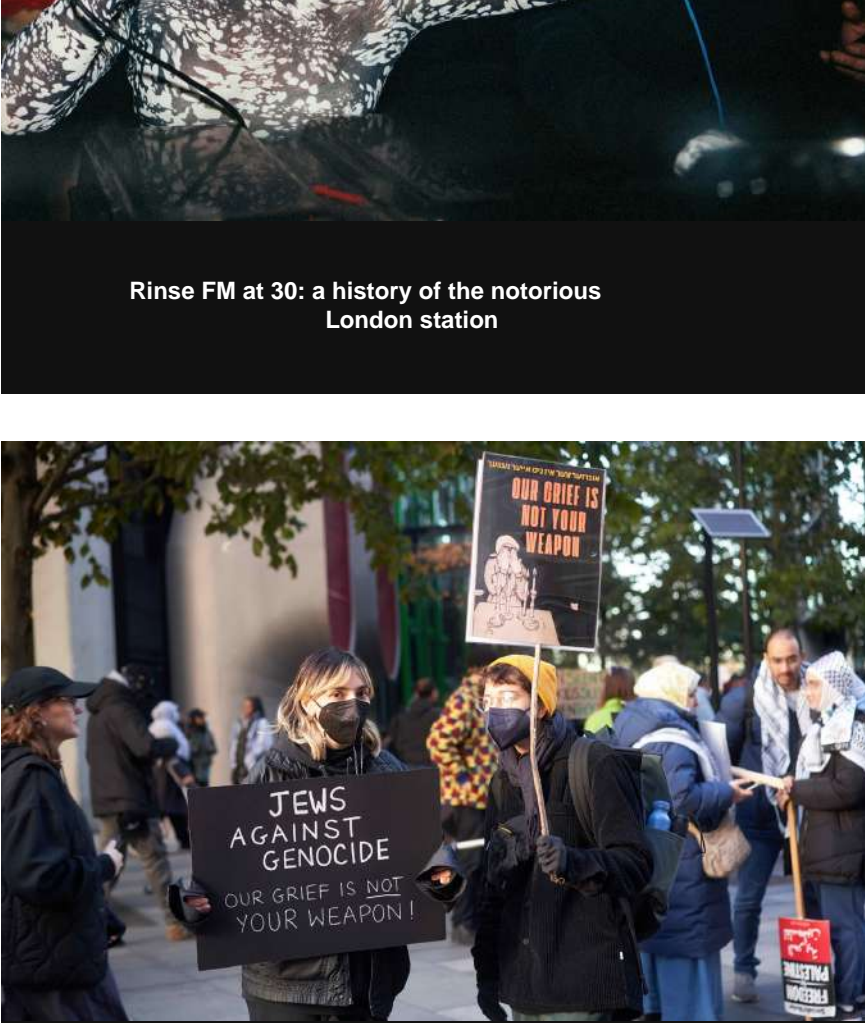
MORE FEATURES



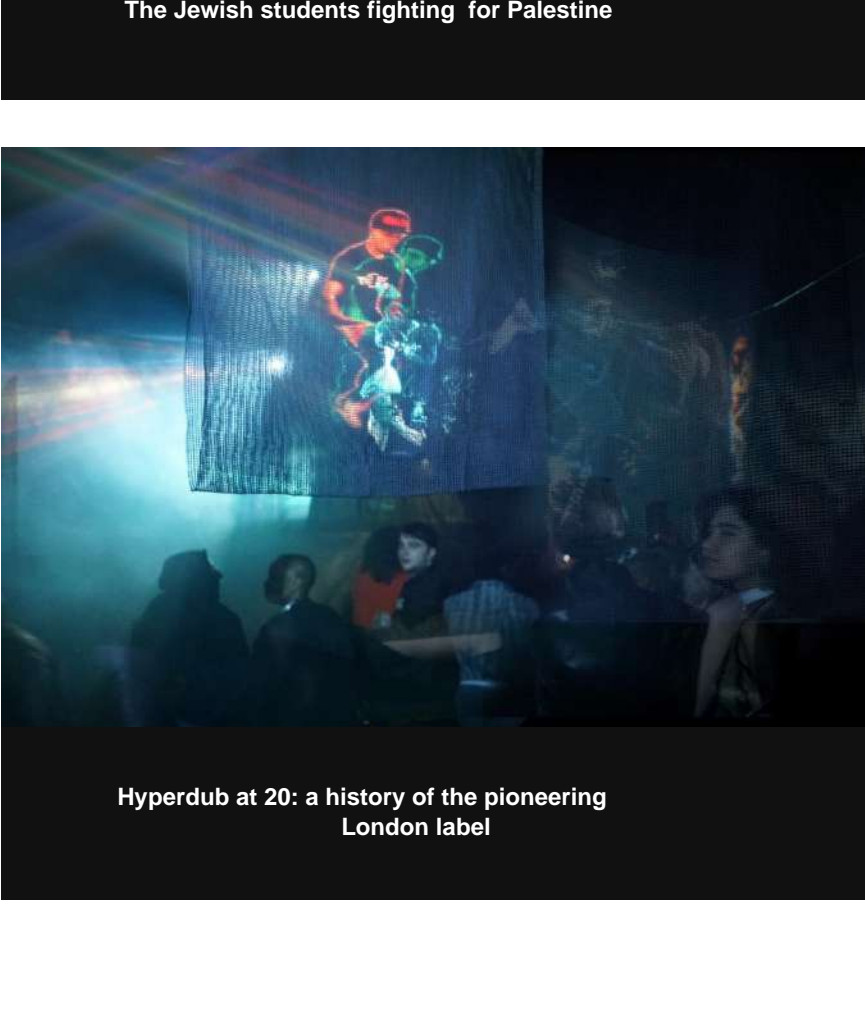
Freddie Mercury and the Zoroastrian Rituals: The hidden codes in his songs



Normani: the only way is up



Rinô FM at 30: a history of the notorious London station



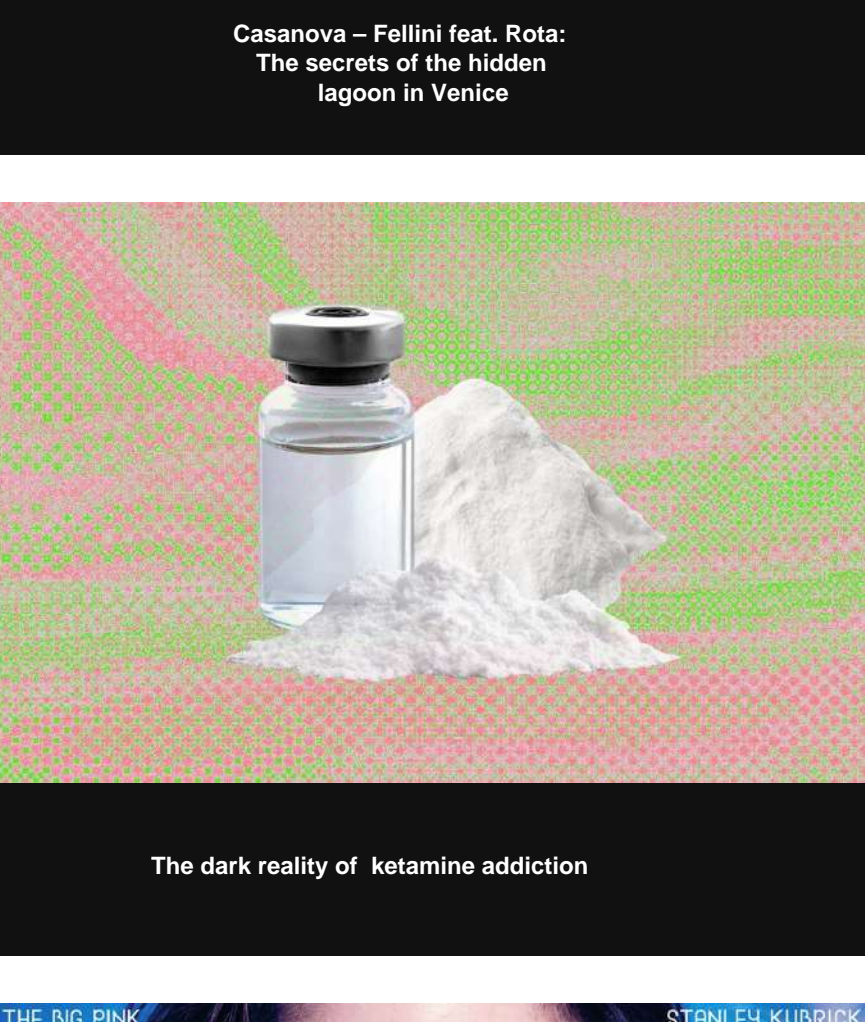
The Jewish students fighting for Palestine



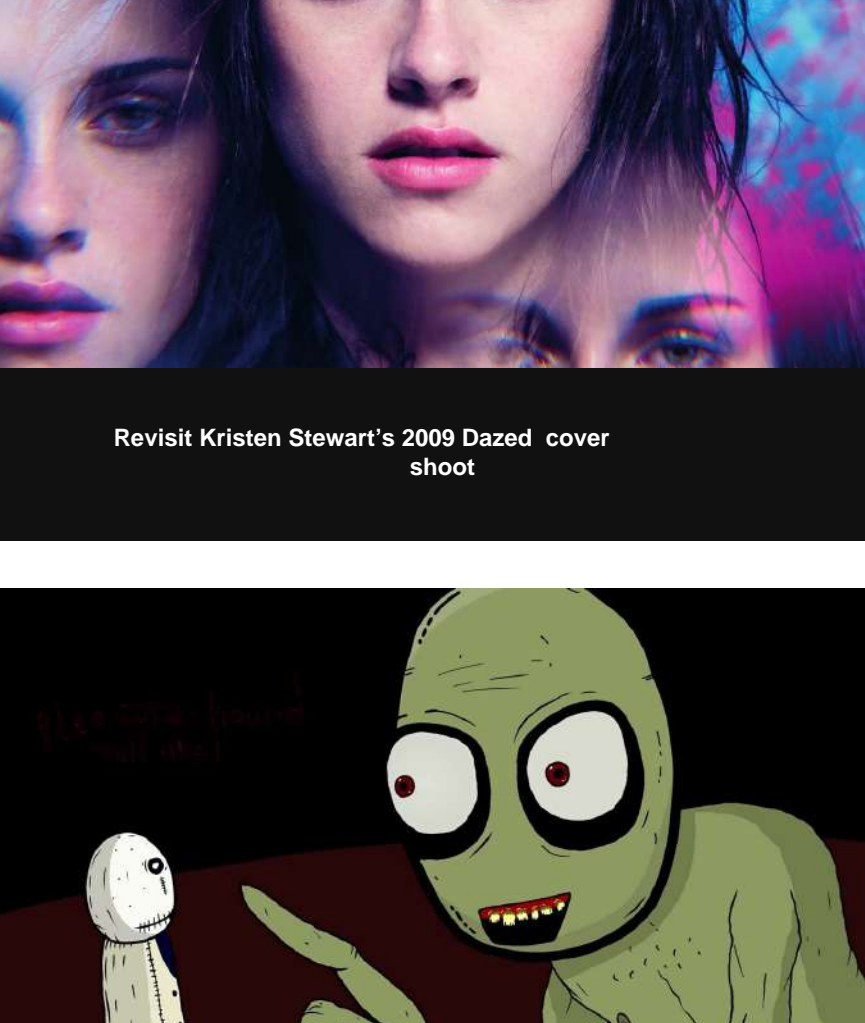
Hyperdub at 20: a history of the pioneering London label



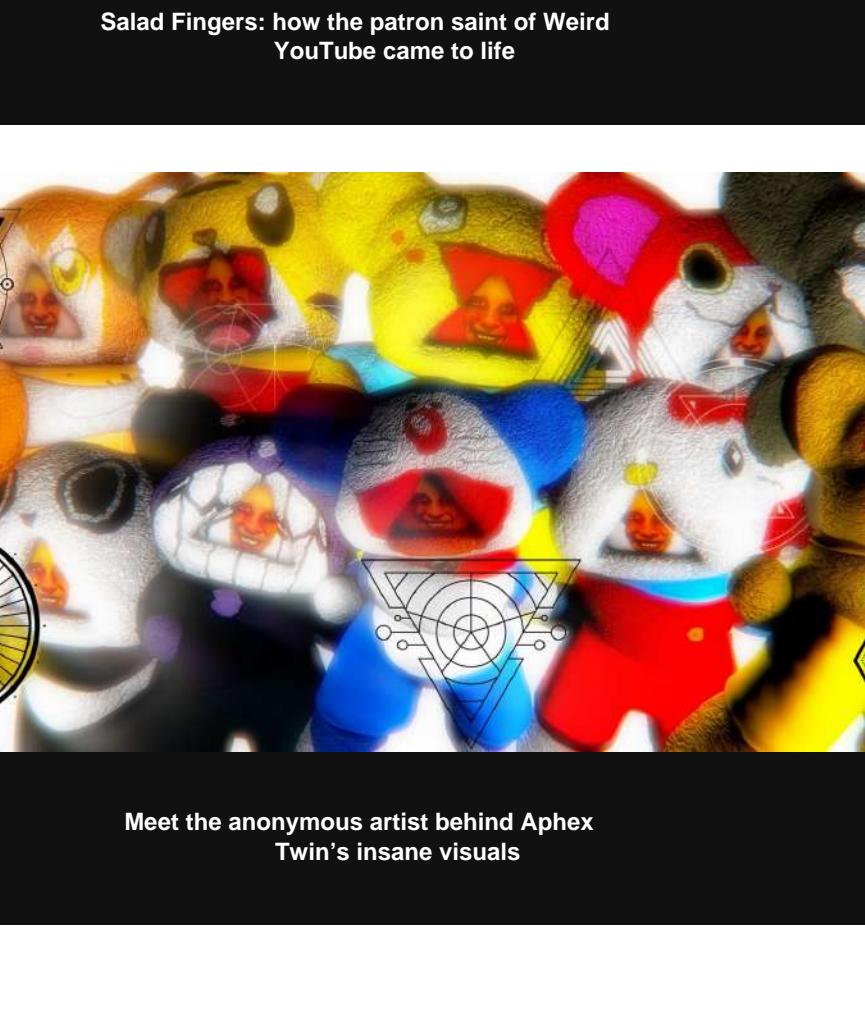
David Bowie and the Spiders from Mars featuring Tesla – The journey to the Red Planet



Casanova – Fellini feat. Rota: The secrets of the hidden lagoon in Venice



Salad Fingers: how the patron saint of Weird YouTube came to life



Meet the anonymous artist behind Aphex Twin's insane visuals