

Only Vintage Bowie Will Stand The Test Of Time

By **Alexander Baron** - Feb 9, 2016



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Shortly after his death last month, I made a point of listening to the following Bowie albums (listed here alphabetically): *Black Tie White Noise*, *Earthling*, *Heroes*, *Let's Dance*, *Lodger*, *Low*, *Outside*, *Scary Monsters (And Super Creeps)*, *The Next Day*, *Tonight*, and *Young Americans*.

I have to say I was singularly unimpressed; I had of course heard a few tracks from some of these albums before, but there was nothing special there, indeed for the most part there was nothing, period. Admittedly, I played each album only the once, and even a great album may not sound so great the first time, but again there was nothing special there.

I never saw him live, and would not class myself as a Bowie fan, although I seem to have acquired most of his early albums, largely on vinyl, not bad for a non-fan.

I first became aware of Bowie when I was in secondary school. As far as I can recall, I didn't hear *Space Oddity* until around 1971; I thought it was rubbish then, and still. Like Elton John's *Rocket Man*, which was released in 1972, it has a passable melody, but the words are doggerel. Actually, *Rocket Man* has a great melody, and would render far better as a guitar solo with heavy production including special effects; lyrically it is one of the weakest things the otherwise excellent Bernie Taupin ever produced. As I said, *Space Oddity* is just about passable melodically.

In 1980, Bowie had the temerity to reprise *Space Oddity* with the hideous *Ashes To Ashes*, which reminded me of *Glass Onion*, the dubious John Lennon song which explained *I Am The Walrus*.

[The [SongFacts database](#) has the background to these and many more].

Bowie's earliest efforts like *The Laughing Gnome* and *Ching-A-Ling* were quite pathetic and are best forgotten, but everything changed with the enigmatic November 1970 release *The Man Who Sold The World* which I bought two or three years later on cassette. It kicks off with the 8 minute plus track *The Width Of A Circle*; the title track continues to perplex and entice.

Then came the much lighter *Hunky Dory*, an album full of humour, it opens with *Changes*, then proceeds to *Oh! You Pretty Things*. Also on the lighter side are *Kooks*, *Fill Your Heart* (a cover, and the only non-Bowie composition on the album), and if *Andy Warhol* is not a tribute song, *Song For Bob Dylan* is. *Queen Bitch* is light again with a great riff, and there are the enigmatic songs: the introspective *Quicksand*, *The Bewley Brothers*, and of course, *Life On Mars?* Released as a single, this is one of his great songs, whatever interpretation (if any) the listener puts on it.

I bought *Hunky Dory* on vinyl, next came *The Rise And Fall Of Ziggy Stardust And The Spiders From Mars*, which I believe I bought on vinyl initially then for some reason on cassette as well. There is not a duff track on this album. *Starman* was an obvious single, and like *Rocket Man* was released in 1972; although not quite as strong melodically, it is a fine lyrical effort.

After that came *Aladdin Sane*, another exceptional album, and one which contains another of his truly great songs, *Drive-In Saturday*. Bowie actually offered this to Mott The Hoople, who turned it down! However, they didn't turn down *All The Young Dudes*, which was massive for them, a band that in their first (and real) incarnation were one of my very favourites. **Ian Hunter** wrote an even better song – *Hymn For The Dudes* – and the veteran keyboard player/guitarist and vocalist is still performing to this day. Bowie released *Drive-In Saturday* as a single backed by an uptempo version of an old Chuck Berry song with some blistering lead guitar by Mick Ronson.

After *Aladdin Sane* came *Pin Ups*, which was all covers, so I gave it a miss, then the classic concept album *Diamond Dogs*. I bought this on vinyl, and played it time and again. That was as good as it got. After that came *Young Americans*; I heard the title track and liked it, but more because it was Bowie than disco. I didn't buy the album, and sensed instinctively that I and the world had heard the best of Bowie. By that time too I was already heavily into Elton John and was getting into **Wishbone Ash**, Deep Purple, many others, and shortly **Al Stewart** – the greatest songwriter barring none.

The only other Bowie album I bought was the double *David Live*. I bought this on the strength of hearing one track in a record shop; it featured a blistering guitar solo by Earl Slick, but that was as good as it got, and I found the album very disappointing. Heavy metal is usually best live because of the at times wonderful improvisation, but some artists excel only in the studio. Bowie excelled with *Diamond Dogs*, but never after that.

Lodger is said to be experimental and to have received poor reviews. *Black Tie White Noise* includes a cover of *I Feel Free*. I interrupted *Black Tie...* to watch a documentary about a female serial killer. Apart from the bonus track *Lucy Can't Dance*, what can be said of it? I'd heard a few tracks off the above albums before, such as *Sound And Vision*, but...

It is probably best not to say too much more about Bowie's later work, but those five albums listed above have more than cemented his place in music history. By the same token, vintage Elton John is by far the best, although he produced more than five memorable albums, is still producing songs with occasional flashes of his old brilliance, and will hopefully be with us for many years to come.