

Books & Culture



Showy Bowie

As the much-lauded *David Bowie Is* exhibition lands in Melbourne, BIANCA ZANDER asks why people are more obsessed than ever with the man who fell to Earth.

The Australian leg of the Victoria and Albert Museum's fastest-selling exhibition of all time kicked off with a two-day symposium on the stardom and celebrity of David Bowie. Officially, the symposium was to explore

the cultural and artistic significance of one of the 20th century's most iconic pop stars – slash alien from outer space – but everyone was there for a much simpler reason. We all loved Bowie and we had come to worship his genius.

On the first morning, the lobby of Melbourne's Australian Centre for the Moving

Image (ACMI) filled up with shy, immaculately dressed Bowie fans, nervously checking each other out. Who here was a fanatic and who an academic? Were any of the academics fanatical? Had any of those present slept with Bowie? It wasn't easy to tell the two tribes apart.

Standing out in the crowd was a tall,

BOOKS 50

The power and the mystery of Hamish Clayton's two-part *The Pale North*

BOOKS 52

Jane Cornwell's female perspective on the bloke's world of music journalism

CLASSICAL 56

Spanish sounds waft through three collections including songs from Jack Body

FILM 58

There's something un-jazzy about Woody Allen's *Irrational Man*



Strange fascination: A colour-enhanced image of Bowie from a photoshoot for his 1973 *Pin Ups* album and, below, at a festival in 1996.

pretty fellow in a tailored grey suit, his gaunt face hidden by a floppy orange fringe. In a room where garish nods to Ziggy Stardust were commonplace, this guy was channelling mid-70s Thin White Duke – a look not easily pulled off by anyone not cocaine ravaged. Clearly, a fanatic of the highest order.

Or not. Half an hour later, Professor Will Brooker of Kingston University, London, took to the stage to deliver the symposium's keynote address, throwing around with ease such words as "dialectic" and "chronotope", and he was none other than the Thin White Duke from the lobby.

Brooker is midway through an immersive project to live as 1970s Bowie. By spending a year visiting the musician's old haunts, learning to sing like him, dressing like him, reading what he read and even following his radical mid-70s diet of milk and red peppers, Brooker hopes to gain insight into Bowie's state of mind. So much had already been written about Bowie, he explained, that he'd sought an original approach to his monograph.

"Are you doing the cocaine as well?" asked one wag in the audience. "Cocaine is illegal," said Brooker, dodging the question in true Bowie style.

Bowie. We all love him, but for different reasons. For some, it's his pervasive influence on fashion. One of the symposium's most entertaining sessions looked for visual evidence that gender-bending glam-rock alien Ziggy Stardust had infected nearly every catwalk show since the 1970s, and found it in abundance. Another speaker examined the hetero-normative social structures of the 1960s and ably demonstrated how Bowie, with his androgynous and openly bisexual persona, had been instrumental in changing what it meant to be a man.

I love all that too about Bowie but I go back to him for the music. In this area the symposium fell short. Despite his

churning out some of the most astonishingly distinctive tunes of the past 50 years – *Space Oddity*, *Rebel Rebel*, *Life On Mars?*, *Golden Years*, *Sound and Vision*, *Young Americans*, *Heroes*, *Ashes to Ashes*, *Let's Dance*, *Modern Love* among them – only one speaker, composer and academic Leah



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Kardos, also from Kingston University, looked seriously at Bowie's music.

Kardos wanted to challenge the widely held view – which Bowie encouraged – that he is a second-rate musician who is nothing without his collaborators (Mick Ronson, Brian Eno, Tony Visconti). "He's a composer and musician and I want to defend that," she said, to rapturous applause. She then played sound loop compilations of dozens of Bowie songs, highlighting unusual and complex musical motifs. She followed this up with

graphs illustrating Bowie's vast vocal range. "All the harmonies are his, and some of those are the most complex parts of his music."

The real David Bowie was born David Jones in Brixton on January 8, 1947, but who really cares? Not any of the speakers at the symposium or the curators of the accompanying exhibition. Notably absent from both was anything about Bowie's personal life, his wives and children, as though he really had fallen to Earth and had no use for such things. The exhibition was curated from Bowie's personal archive, which goes a long way to explaining the oversight (he likes to keep his private life that way), but after two days immersed in all things Bowie, I understood his fans are complicit in the omission.

Asked if he had ever met his idol, Brooker responded that he wouldn't want to. "I have a sense of my own Bowie and it's not necessarily based on the real one."

I was moved to tears twice in the exhibition, which at times I found cacophonous and visually overwhelming. The first was upon seeing the handwritten lyrics to my favourite songs. The second was watching the decade-old music video for *Thursday's Child*, which I had somehow missed. In it, Bowie challenges us to stare into a mirror at his ageing face, looking for someone we recognise. But even he sees ghosts. Meanwhile, just outside the exhibition, a two-storey mugshot of Aladdin Sane – cocky and immortal in his lightning-bolt make-up – dominates the streets of downtown Melbourne. Imagine getting old and frail while the virility of your most enduring creation is more potent than ever after 40 years.

Exposing the man behind the myth verges on distasteful to Bowie fanatics. Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, the Thin White Duke and even "David Bowie" are all exquisite vehicles for fantasy and projection. The genius of their creator is to understand that to believe in his most influential inventions, we need him to stay out of the way. ■

DAVID BOWIE IS runs at Melbourne's ACMI until November 1.