



FAREWELL STARMAN

FOLLOWING THE SAD PASSING OF DAVID BOWIE, RANDAL DOANE RUMINATES ON 'HUNKY DORY' AND HOW LENNON'S 'PLASTIC ONO BAND' SAW HIM SET HIS SIGHTS ON THE COSMOS.

FROM ages thirteen to eighteen, I exchanged my every spare dollar for petroleum products; gas for the car to get us to Tower Records where I would purchase long-playing records. I was 18 years old in the summer of 1987 and that August's issue of Rolling Stone's Top 100 albums of the last 20 years provided me with my buyer's guide for the next half decade.

The list is a period piece and – like the world then and now – it incorporates a host of problems: It's Americanist. It's rockist to the core. Black artists, female artists, and black female artists get short shrift. In the US, though, outside of MTV, Night Flight, commercial radio, and three rock periodicals a month (two Rolling Stones and one Spin), it was all we had. With 'Sgt. Pepper' at Number One and 'Never Mind The Bollocks' at Number Two, the list offered a telling vision of rock, its contradictions and the role of artifice.

Following the untimely passing of David Bowie, I thought anew about that list and two other albums from its Top Ten: John Lennon's 'Plastic Ono Band' (#4, 1970) and Bowie's 'The Rise and Fall Of Ziggy Stardust And The Spiders From Mars' (#6, 1972). I believe that Bowie not only knew 'Plastic Ono Band' but it terrified him.

It was Lennon's first album following the dissolution of The Beatles. It reflected his effort to shake loose every flourish of artifice, and Ringo Starr and Klaus Voorman (on bass) represented diligent aides in an exorcism of McCartney's influence. The grooves rattle with musical and lyrical simplicity, and Lennon's revisiting of childhood traumas via primal therapy with Arthur Janov resonate in the vocals of nearly every track. In 'God,' Lennon unabashedly disavows the illusions of pop, prompting tears around the world from recovering Beatlemaniaics.

*"I don't believe in Elvis
I don't believe in Zimmerman
I don't believe in Beatles
I just believe in me,
Yoko and me, and that's reality"*

Bowie, of course, was a big fan of The Beatles. 'Space Oddity' and 'The Man Who Sold The World' preceded the release of 'Plastic Ono Band' in December 1970. Bowie was also a sponge before he was a chameleon, and he drew inspiration from dancer/mime Lindsay Kemp, Andy Warhol, and everything deemed avant-garde in London, including the work of Aleister Crowley, Kafka, and Nietzsche.

For 'The Man Who Sold The World,' Bowie reflected upon his own fears, and in particular, the spectre of schizophrenia – which had plagued his mother's side of the family. In 'All The Madmen,' Bowie sings of his alienation from his mates during adolescence, with appropriately adolescent sentimentality:

*"Cause I'd rather stay here
With all the madmen
Than perish with the sad men roaming free
And I'd rather play here
With all the madmen
For I'm quite content
They're all as sane as me"*

The popular perception of 'The Man...' as a heavy metal album is appropriate, for it is largely bereft of either sweetness or light. The lyrics, the vocals, Mick Ronson's guitar virtuosity, and the musical mix are heavy. Bowie's subsequent return to the theme of space travel, along with his remaking of a radically new aesthetic, was not some natural progression. It certainly had antecedents – 'Plastic Ono Band' was among them. Lennon's contrivance of anti-artifice, and the revisiting of trauma

for musical inspiration, scared Bowie straight – straight back to avant-garde theatre and its celebration of characters rather than people, surfaces rather than depths, and comedie dell'arte, rather than the grim earnestness of the classic rock artist.

Hence the title, 'Hunky Dory.' As author David Buckley notes in *Strange Fascination: David Bowie, The Definitive Story*, "It's almost easy-listening status and conventional musical sensibility has detracted from the fact that, lyrically, this record lays down the blueprint for Bowie's future career." The influence of Iggy Pop and Velvet Underground, too, registered mostly on 'Ziggy Stardust', rather than 'Hunky Dory' – with 'Queen Bitch' as the exception. This is a debt that Bowie acknowledges – uncharacteristically, some might say – on the LP's back cover. Bowie's annotations of the track list include, alongside 'Queen Bitch,' "(Some UV white light returned) thanks," referring of course to the Velvets' 'White Light/White Heat.' Alongside Ken Scott, Bowie also takes co-production credits on the album, referring to himself as 'the actor'.

While 'The Man...' might have been recorded by either Blue Cheer or Black Sabbath, 'Hunky Dory' is essential, incipient Bowie – the germinal cell for his work for the next ten years lay in the songs that bridge the two sides of the album: 'Quicksand', which closes Side One, reprises Bowie's fascination with Nietzsche's superman archetype and, for critics such as Roy Carr and Charles Shaar Murray, represents "Bowie in his darkest and most metaphysical mood".

*"Should I kiss the viper's fang?
Or herald loud the death of Man
I'm sinking in the quicksand of my thought
And I ain't got the power anymore"*

Sure, there's gravitas in Bowie's name-checking of Himmler, Crowley, and Churchill, but it's within the pageantry of the dreamlike chorus where Bowie offers the greatest conviction:

*"Don't believe in yourself, don't deceive with belief
Knowledge comes with death's release
Aah-aah, aah-aah, aah-aah, aah-aah"*

If Bowie ever held 'the power', he releases it here to the universe – or at least to the responsibility of more earnest rockers. Lennon's affirmation of 'that's reality' enables Bowie to defer pursuit of reality altogether, delighted to glide along on a jet stream of McCartney-sequel syllabic nonsense. Within a few years, Lennon's earnest mode had developed into an affliction, according to author Greil Marcus. In *Mystery Train*, Marcus' diagnosis indicates that 'Rock 'n' roll is suffering from that old progressive school fallacy that says if what you write about is your own feelings, no one can criticize it... This is about as liberating as thinking typecast movie stars are 'really like' the roles they play.'

Side Two of 'Hunky Dory' opens with Bowie's bouncy rendition of Biff Rose and Paul Williams' 'Fill Your Heart', which originally appeared as the B-side of Tiny Tim's 'Tiptoe Through The Tulips'. Could Bowie have picked a better tune to spoof rock's pretensions? I doubt it. The inclusion of a cover song also has particular resonance in terms of Bowie's ambivalence about the rock artist archetype. (By contrast, Lennon included only original compositions on his first four post-Beatles LPs.)

Likewise, there is no mistaking how much fun Bowie, Ronson, and others are having on 'Heart'. Along with the jazzy horns and piano, and the refrain of "freeeee, yeah-yeah-yeah, yeah-yeah-yeah", Bowie offers a slight pinch to his vocals to indicate that he's having a gas and taking the piss. (Bowie's mastery of his own voice already had few rivals. Bowie was, for producer Ken Scott, "the only singer I ever worked with where virtually every take was a master.") With the songs (and the sleeve art), Bowie tells his listeners that he's done with the hippies, and already has turned his sights to the stars – and the sequins.

Godspeed, Starman. And, from all the (once) young dudes and gals, thank you. 🐦