

# **Changelings: David Bowie and the zeitgeist of Melbourne 1978**

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## **Intro**

We loved his old stuff, the mesmerising album covers, the worlds of ideas within them and the trendy androgyny, but during his Serious Moonlight period, my brothers Jeremy, Andy and I stroked our whiskerless adolescent chins and concluded, with great solemnity, that David Bowie's best work was 'all a bit before our time.' And besides, his bandwagon was too crowded now. This was the 1980s, somewhere in outer-suburban Melbourne, and evidently we were juvenile music snobs. Let's Dance? Let's not, we decided. At that time our tastes were drifting towards what we considered to be the more exciting possibilities of the Triffids, the Go-betweens British independent music and US college radio. By the time the three of us had all grown up and formed our own bands in the 1990s, David Bowie's first 12 or so records remained crucial touchstones, but as his new recordings continued to pile up in the 2000s, we were never really convinced by the perennial claim made on the singer's behalf – that Bowie was back. Being 'back' was not enough. We wanted him to come back and surprise us, to show us the future as he had done in the past. My brothers and I were in accord with *Trainspotting's* Sick Boy, who put Bowie on his list of conspicuous figures who 'had it, lost it.'<sup>1</sup>

When I commenced this research it occurred to me that conventional historical method might not suffice. The departure point for my analysis is a living subject who actively participates in his own mythmaking, surrounded by a giant marketing operation with a commercial imperative to keep the juggernaut rolling, legions of fans who form a vast diffuse network of subjectivities spanning the globe and many decades of time, and the motive force of sundry journalists, museologists, musicologists, scholars and theoreticians. Moreover, was there really any need for me to add my voice to this hubbub, everyone stealing ideas from each other and using Bowie song lyrics for titles?

I considered producing a scholarly piece of research, perhaps examining the 1978 Low/Heroes tour through Australia and Japan as constructed through present day fansites, which routinely reinscribe ideas of Australian regional identity that separates it from an imagined ‘Asia.’ However, as I actually wanted an audience, I opted instead for an analysis of the cultural landscape of Melbourne in 1978, to seek explanations for the extraordinary reception Bowie received on his first tour here, and perhaps the folkloric Melbourne ticket queue. It would be written of course, with the cool objectivity of the third person – far be it from me to indulge vulgar narcissism by inserting myself in the narrative. However, as things unfolded, it became clear to me that this was different terrain for a cultural historian such as myself, normally drawn to obscure, but inherently worthy topics, entirely lacking mass appeal. Quite clearly, Bowie is not an obscure topic, and given his gargantuan digital presence, finding a gap in the knowledge of this much-observed musician seems close to impossible. Furthermore, the nature of the source material presents analytical and methodological challenges: the repository is vast; rarely academic, it is overwhelmingly partisan and generally directed to the service of commerce, personal validation, or both. The following is a version of the paper I set out to write.

## **Verses**

From the vantage point of 1980 and in language that seems to betray a certain set of fixed generational perspectives, *New York Times* music critic Joan Rockwell argued that 1970s popular music had been no match for that of the 1960s. She dismissed music of the 1970s as no more than a consolidation of the creativity of the 1960s, but “stripped of...the utopian idealism that had fuelled its origins.” The result was “a good deal of ponderous, flaccid music.”<sup>2</sup> While Rockwell saw glimmers of hope in the emergence of punk, new wave and disco, she leaned heavily towards white, male 1960s acts in their second decade, seeing “much to admire” in The Eagles, Jackson Browne, James Taylor, Linda Ronstadt, Neil Young, Bob Dylan, Stevie Wonder and from the other side of the Atlantic the Rolling Stones, The Who, Roxy Music, Led Zeppelin and our very own David Bowie.<sup>3</sup>

In 1978, two members of Rockwell's Pantheon had visited Australia. While only six years separated them in age, the audiences for David Bowie and Bob Dylan fell a full generation apart. The times indeed a-changed – perhaps even ch-ch-changed? In words better suited to a stoner rock era, a hack at *Disc* called Bowie's music as "some of the best rock to arrive in our minds for years."<sup>4</sup> An RCA<sup>5</sup> publicity blurb explained that Bowie, the "darling of the avant-garde," had now "moved into the greater arena" and was, in so doing, "shaking up the ears of the rock purists."<sup>6</sup> A UK music writer described Bowie in concert as "dressed first as Harlequin meets Startrek and then in Garboesque white satin. He has a painted white face, a haircut from Clockwork Orange and moves like a marionette."<sup>7</sup> Yes – new musical cultures had sprung up beneath the feet of the baby boomers including art rock, glam rock and German electronic music, which so entranced Bowie, changes which could not be fairly described as 'ponderous and flaccid.' In the rapid fashion cycles of avant-garde under-25s, the sounds of the 1960s generation, a generation that had defined itself by its youth, were now old. As Dylan trudged through Australia on his poorly received 'alimony tour,' Bowie, all ghostly pallor, Berlin cabaret cool and cigarette dangling just so, bestrode the stage at the peak of his powers.

Late 1970s Melbourne was a different planet to Melbourne of today. Don Lane and Bert Newton ruled the airwaves on 3UZ. As Helen Garner's novel *Monkey Grip* revealed a sex-drugs-and-rock-and-roll inner city probably unknown to Don and Bert's audience, the new modernist sculpture Vault, dubbed the 'yellow peril' by *The Sun*, got the tabloid into an populist frenzy sufficient to have the sculpture exiled to the outlands of South Bank.

Musically, most Australians were plumbed into a mains supply somewhere adjacent to the north Atlantic. Elton John and Rod Stewart rode high in the charts. Prevailing local forms were essentially bogged versions of US rock and pop: AC/DC, Cold Chisel, Air Supply, Sherbert, Skyhooks, LRB, The Angels and Dragon, with their creepy hit 1978 'Are you old enough?' Even the Australian nationalist strands of bushwacking balladeers took their cues from US folksy forms. For mainstream concertgoers, recent memories might include the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin at Kooyong, or at the Myer Music Bowl the Beach Boys, ABBA, ELO, and Paul McCartney on his Wings Over America (in Australia) tour, some good gigs among

them, to be sure, but tending towards the bloated, the nostalgic, the denim clad or the pop-tastic. Not many Australians dared ventured off this grid. Those who did – and there were some – were some very interesting cats indeed.

Notwithstanding Triple J's recent ahistorical imagining of itself as the fountainhead of Australian youth culture, thriving local scenes of independent and underground musical cultures existed in Australia long before the Sydney radio station's inception and quite oblivious to governmental attempts to institutionalise the 'voice of youth' at Double J. In Melbourne, far removed from the popular music program *Countdown* and the top forty battles of 3XY and 3AK "Where no wrinklies fly," migrant neighbourhoods and down at heel inner-city suburbs formed the backdrop to the experimental art/post-punk Little Band scene, in which acts formed and reformed in a state of constant mutation (and wildly variable quality) at bohemian hotspots including the Seaview Hotel/Seaview Ballroom/Crystal Ballroom/, Tiger Lounge, The Champion, the Bottom Line, Exford Hotel, Hearts Polaris, Royal Oak, Market Hotel and RMIT's Story Hall.

These 'bands' came together and fell apart, often on the same night, improvised – or made it up – and were recorded live for anarchic broadcasters 3RRR, 3PBS and 3CR. Occasionally their work was pressed for sale at Au Go Go and Missing Link records. In the best spirit of youthful ambition, it was personal quest, transgression and subversion of dominant forms, a bit collectified.

As the Sex Pistols splintered, in the Caulfield attic bedroom of schoolboy Nick Cave, a band called The Boys Next Door began doing whatever it was they thought they were doing. In otherwise boring, culturally cringing, hetero-normative suburban Australia, there were those nudging the culture along, in heady blends of youth, music and fashion, craving revolution, adventurous early adopters who saw virtue in change, creating things and following things that could be temporary, could be enduring. Styles from elsewhere were being reinvented or badly copied locally, but among those who distinguished themselves from mass enthusiasms, novelty had cache, unimaginative imitation did not. For those who saw virtue in change, Bowie was vital archetype.

In January 1978, Vibes, the 'young people's section' in the *Australian Women's Weekly* announced: "Finally David Bowie is to tour Australia. He's been a BIG name here for years,"<sup>8</sup> Vibes explained. A mismatched cohort of Melbourne young people did not need to have popular culture translated for them.

Immortalised in local legend and the film *Dogs in Space* (1986), hundreds of Bowie fans slept rough outside the MCG ticket office, queuing for weeks, twice, first to buy tickets, later to enter the Bowie concert itself, fending off other youth tribes of football fans and bottle throwing sharpies to do so. On the night of the concert, an early summer torrential downpour drenched the arena, but did not dampen the spirits of what was Bowie's largest audience to date. Bowie later recalled, "The enthusiasm of both the audience and ourselves was something as a concert I always looked back as fond memories on. That was the highlight for me of the last tour."<sup>9</sup>

Bowie went on to Sydney, according to reviewer Stephen Downes:

the crowd lapping up the faster and harder songs...[but] the textural mood pieces Warszawa and Sense of Doubt drew only polite applause. Perhaps such morose doomy works are more appropriate to a European background, but meaningless to a nonchalant Sydney audience.<sup>10</sup>

Downes concluded however, "Bowie is undoubtedly the total master of his environment and physically and intellectually the most exciting performer in the world today."<sup>11</sup> Fans also camped out in Brisbane, home to punk pioneers The Saints, but at the time captive to decades of autocratic control under the right wing rural conservatism of the Bjelke-Petersen government. With wondrous fuddy-duddy-ism and xenophobia, minister Russ Hinze publically lamented the noise of Bowie's open air show, "These pop singers come out here to make a quick quid by disturbing our peace and tranquillity. The fact that he's a pommie as well wouldn't help."<sup>12</sup>

## Outro

The popularity of David Bowie in Australia grew slowly at first, then escalated quickly, and then levelled off in a S-curve of diffusion. Where some saw important innovation, others saw a trivial fad. The disorderly, good spirited MCG ticket queue came from a historically specific milieu, gathering with significant levels of dedication (and free time), but for what cause? It began with a belief that something was wrong and there was a need for improvement. The 1960s belonged to others, as did most of flaccid, ponderous music that rolled out in the years that followed. Those camped out in the MCG ticket queue valued cultural change and sought inspiration from those who might know how to improve things. Bowie seemed able to solve several problems at once, namely music, boredom and gender. He signified ideas and images of change: a break from the cloying past and escape from the anxious present, to a better future. Maybe he could see into the 1980s and knew about things there? Two cultural trajectories intersected at the ticket queue, generating a humming sympathetic resonance: the trajectory of Bowie's career at a sweet point in its ascendancy and an array of cultural trajectories in the local landscape. Gays, fashionistas and chin stroking music purists were united in their admiration for Bowie's talent and his savoir-faire. The Bowie concert was forward looking and of the zeitgeist, in a way that the dominant modes of sweaty pub rock, Dylan, the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, sharpies, surfies and bikies, were not. In just two years, Bowie would record his last great album, *Scary Monsters*. He would tour Australia again, several times, but there would be no tour like this one, unmatched in its sweet anticipation. There can only be one first time. And my brothers and I missed it.

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<sup>1</sup> Andy disputes this. He says that my argument at the time was that Bowie had it and lost it *because he moved the US*, where, surrounded by yes men and hideous sessions hacks, interesting British musicians unfailingly go to seed. Jeremy now says that some of Bowie's more recent material isn't so bad.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Rockwell, *New York Times*, republished *Canberra Times*, 1 January 1980 p.10.

<sup>3</sup> Rockwell, 1 January 1980 p.10.

<sup>4</sup> *Disc*, RCA publicity release, 1978.

<sup>5</sup> Bowie's label RCA (Radio Corporation of America).

<sup>6</sup> RCA publicity release, 1978.

<sup>7</sup> Unnamed UK writer, RCA publicity release, 1978.

<sup>8</sup> Vibes, *Australian Women's Weekly*, 4 January 1978, p. 73.

<sup>9</sup> WWW.DAVIDBOWIEWORLD.NL, [www.http://www.davidbowieworld.nl/mijn-bootlegs-2-2/tour-recordings/1978-the-isolar-ii-world-tour/attachment/david-bowie-melbourne-1978-11-18/](http://www.davidbowieworld.nl/mijn-bootlegs-2-2/tour-recordings/1978-the-isolar-ii-world-tour/attachment/david-bowie-melbourne-1978-11-18/), accessed 11 July 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Downes, Bowie review, Sydney, 1978, n/p. [bowiedownunder.com](http://www.bowiedownunder.com), <http://www.bowiedownunder.com/lowheroes/6.html>, accessed 11 July 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Downes, 1978, n/p. [bowiedownunder.com](http://www.bowiedownunder.com), <http://www.bowiedownunder.com/lowheroes/6.html>, accessed 11 July 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Russ Hinze, [bowiedownunder.com](http://www.bowiedownunder.com), <http://www.bowiedownunder.com/lowheroes/8.html>, accessed 11 July 2015.