

# Station to Station: The Origins of David Bowie's Individualism

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## 1: I WILL BE KING

In 1979, David Bowie sat down for a wide-ranging interview with Mavis Nicholson for the BBC program *Afternoon Plus*. For whatever reason, this appearance proved one of the few instances of this chameleonic musician apparently letting his guard down and giving some small glimpse of the man within. Suspended for the moment were the camp affectations, the animated gestures, and the strained, big-toothed grin and barking laugh he typically deployed during interviews. Instead, viewers were introduced to a quiet, thoughtful young man with a vigorous smoking habit.

Addressing the themes of isolation and loneliness that pervaded so many of his songs, Bowie told Nicholson, “I think if [a person] is in isolation, instead of receiving the whole world as his home, he tends to create a micro world inside himself. And it’s that peculiar part of the human mind that fascinates me: the small universes that can be created inside the mind.” Bowie stated that he himself had never felt isolated, but that he often deliberately put himself into isolating situations—such as his move to Berlin in the late 1970s—in order to see what it felt like.

Here Bowie was being (perhaps unintentionally) disingenuous. His biographers all agree that a sense of isolation had, in fact, been a key component of his psyche virtually from birth. David Robert Jones was born in January 1947 in Brixton, London, the only child of Haywood Stenton “John” Jones and Margaret “Peggy” Burns. The parents did not enjoy an easy relationship. John was quiet and self-contained, whereas Peggy was a passionate extrovert, given to sudden mood swings. Schizophrenia and other mental disorders afflicted her side of the family. The two parents quarreled often. David Jones felt the typical loneliness coupled with self-centeredness of an only child, compounded by a nagging fear that he might someday succumb to the family disease of madness. It was not an unfounded fear: Bowie’s half-brother, Terry Burns, began showing signs of schizophrenia as a young adult and spent the remainder of his life in and out of institutions. Perhaps due to all of these circumstances, David Jones turned inward.

These were the obvious roots of his individuality, but there were more benign factors at play as well. Speaking of his family in a 1996 interview on Netherlands television, Bowie was able to look back with affection and credit their example for his own powerful self-reliant streak. “I don’t think anybody in my family ever belonged to ‘groups,’” he said. “We’re not group people. We tend to be very self-sufficient people. Give us a book and a paintbrush and we don’t really need anything else.”

And here we arrive at another major factor that shaped David Bowie’s personality: his lifelong reading habit. In that same 1996 interview, he credited his father for his own love of reading. “To this day it still gives me the most extraordinary pleasure,” he said. “I couldn’t possibly tell you how fantastic it is to become fully involved in the thinking and the ideas and the location of somebody else’s mind.”

It was perhaps inevitable that the independent-minded young man would gravitate to writers of a similarly free-thinking disposition. An early touchstone was Jean Jacques Rousseau, whose works of political philosophy Jones/Bowie read as a teenager. We can only speculate on Bowie's takeaway from his reading of Rousseau's complex and varied writings. The idea of the "social contract"—that individuals should voluntarily subordinate some of their rights to the state in the interests of the "general will" or greater good—may not have made much of an initial impact, though it arguably assumed greater import as Bowie grew older. Rousseau's advocacy of equality across class lines and his intriguing notion that "nature (makes) man happy and good, but that society depraves him and makes him miserable" probably found more favor. The latter sentiment surfaces, subtly but noticeably, on the albums *The Man Who Sold the World* and *Aladdin Sane*. Bowie would also have likely agreed with Rousseau's view that the sole aim of education ought to be to teach the individual how to reason.

The young Bowie also read the 19th-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. It would be difficult to overstate Nietzsche's influence on Bowie's early work, as references—direct and oblique—to his ideas litter Bowie's first several albums. Nietzsche is perhaps best known for having declared in his book *The Gay Science* that "God is dead," which has often been interpreted as a call to atheism. The philosopher's actual views, however, may have been more complicated. In her 1968 introduction to a reissued version of *The Fountainhead*, Ayn Rand described Nietzsche as a "mystic." She intended this as a pejorative (she also described him as an "irrationalist"), but her own bias against such things should not detract from the fundamental correctness of her interpretation. The "God is dead" declaration more accurately heralds the death of traditional metaphysics. It is true that Nietzsche himself had no faith in religion or traditional notions of a deity, and from that flowed a negation of traditional morality, but his faith in art—and in music in particular—as an acceptable replacement could almost be termed religious.

Nihilism, the view that life is both meaningless and valueless, can accompany an initial loss of religious faith. But Nietzsche rejected this position as well. A useful generalization of his work would be to think of it as a long-form grappling with how we may best approach life in the wake of the collapse of the old value systems. The solution, in Nietzsche's view, is not to give in to chaos and despair but to embrace the world as it is with vitality and joy, and to create new values based on the particular needs of the moment. Nietzsche eschewed fashionable ideas of egalitarianism in favor of a recognition of man's fundamentally unequal nature: that human beings have differing levels of strength, intelligence, talent, and ability. Certain individuals will inevitably rise from the herd, realizing their potential more completely, more definitively, than others. These are the beings who will shape the new values. These are "the Supermen." Through the force of their "will to power," they assume their rightful place as leaders and innovators and push humanity forward. In Nietzsche's view, this ascendancy should be encouraged, not stymied.

Obviously, this philosophy is ripe for misinterpretation (and misuse), and Bowie himself, perhaps addled by heavy cocaine use, would take Nietzsche's ideas to disturbing, seemingly fascistic extremes in the mid-1970s. But initially it was the affirming, romantic aspects of the Superman ideal that held him in thrall. Subsequent events indicate that he saw the concept as an invitation, a permission, for his own self-actualization. He certainly had plenty of time to think about these things during the eight-month period he spent away from school in his mid-teens recovering from an injury—incurred during a "fight over a girl"—that left his left eye permanently disfigured. "I took a look at my thoughts, my appearance, my expressions, my mannerisms and idiosyncrasies and didn't like them," he later told *Rolling Stone*. "So I stripped myself down, chucked things out and replaced them with a completely new personality." It could be said that David Jones read Nietzsche and concluded that "we can be heroes." David Jones subsequently became David Bowie, a change in moniker that was one-half necessitated by the emergence of another performer with his name (the Monkees' Davy Jones) and one-half mandated by his new Nietzsche-derived sense of self-empowerment. "The name Bowie just appealed to me when I was younger," he told *Rolling Stone* in 1974. "I was into a kind of heavy philosophy thing when I was 16 years old, and I wanted a truism about cutting through the lies and all that."

## 2: I COULD MAKE IT ALL WORTHWHILE AS A ROCK AND ROLL STAR

The will to power asserted itself early. At the age of 12, David Jones confessed to a schoolteacher his ambition to become “the British Elvis.” In 1969, well before he had experienced major success, the recently minted David Bowie told journalist (and future biographer) George Tremlett, “I shall be a millionaire by the time I’m 30.” This serene confidence in his destiny had already carried the young musician though a succession of managers and failed bands, and would continue to guide him in the fitful years ahead. How much of this derived from Nietzsche is not clear; his “Elvis” comment predates his discovery of the philosopher. But Nietzsche’s ideas likely bolstered, and clarified, such ambitions.

David Bowie differed with Nietzsche on the question of God, though it’s possible that Nietzsche helped nudge the young man away from the safe route of traditional religion in favor of an individual (and, as it turned out, lifelong) search for the true shape of the divine.

Bowie most assuredly did not believe that God was dead. On the contrary, he made the cryptic pronouncement in the song “Width of a Circle” that “God’s a young man too.” Later, he described the search for God as his primary motivating impulse in life and art. “Everything I’ve written is about ‘Who is my God?’” he said. “How does he show himself? What is my higher stage, my higher being?”—thus marrying his Nietzschean ideas of self-actualization to a spiritual quest. He told Paul Du Noyer, “If you can make the spiritual connection with some kind of clarity then everything else would fall into place. A morality would seem to be offered, a plan would seem to be offered. Some sense would be there. But it evades me. Yet I can’t help writing about it.” What may have frustrated him in life evidently fueled his art, as his ongoing failure in finding a satisfactory resolution in this realm lent his music a restless, searching quality right to the end.

Rounding out Bowie’s early influences was his discovery, via his half-brother Terry Burns, of the American “Beat” writer Jack Kerouac, whose *On the Road* blends the Nietzschean celebration of self with the sort of rapturous, open-ended spirituality that Bowie sought in his own life. The book’s spirituality somehow fused Kerouac’s ingrained Catholicism to the delirious energy of Charlie Parker’s saxophone playing. In the cascading torrent of notes, Kerouac heard rhythms and possibilities which became, for him, the pulse to a different mode of living. It was the same effect that the music of Little Richard later had on the young Bowie: the wildness, the promise of music—in this case rock-and roll—as a means of deliverance from the emotional and spiritual constraints of a lower-middle-class life. Kerouac had captured the seismic upheaval of the arrival of rock-and-roll, minus the rock, several years early.

Even with the advent of the hippie movement in the 1960s, David Bowie always remained a Beat partisan, or, rather, a fan of two particular Beats—Kerouac and William S. Burroughs, which is significant. Despite the presence of Allen Ginsberg—a more overtly activist type—in both movements, the Beats were by and large apolitical. They were less concerned with remaking society than with living below its radar, or, barring that, carving out some sense of individuality within society’s constraints. With Kerouac, Bowie shared an ambivalence toward revolutionary action. This is borne out by the song “Cygnets Committee” from his early album *Space Oddity*, which takes direct aim at the groupthink aspects of the hippie movement. “I ravaged at my finance just for those / Those whose claims were steeped in peace, tranquility,” he sings. Later, he mocks the violent tendencies of many of these supposed peace activists: “I will fight for the right to be right / I will kill for the good of the fight for the right to be right.” The communal aspects of hippie culture disturbed Bowie. During a joint interview with Burroughs in 1974, Bowie spoke derisively about anything that smacked of the hippie ethos, including the typical rock concert experience. “The idea of getting minds together smacks of the Flower Power period to me,” Bowie said. “The coming together of people I find obscene as a principle. It is not human. It is not a natural thing as some people would have us believe.” He went on to lambast sci-fi/libertarian hero Robert Heinlein’s novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*, whose alien-messiah protagonist, Valentine Michael Smith, was often thought to be a point of reference for Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust character, as being “terrible” and “a bit too Flower Powery.” In another interview, Bowie reiterated the counter-revolutionary themes of “Cygnets Committee”:

I would like to believe that people knew what they were fighting for and why they wanted a revolution, and exactly what it was within that they didn't like. I mean to put down a society or the aims of the society is to put down a hell of a lot of people, and that scares me—that there should be such a division where one set of people are saying that another should be killed. You know you can't put down anybody. You can just try and understand. The emphasis shouldn't be on revolution, it should be on communication.

### 3: IT'S NO GAME

Readers detecting a certain conservative strain in Bowie's comments are not imagining things, though Bowie himself would likely never have used such a term to describe himself. Complementing, and not infrequently contradicting, Bowie's prevailing social-libertarian worldview was a certain reticence toward social disruption not too dissimilar from the philosophy of 18th-century politician and writer Edmund Burke, though it ought to be stressed here that Bowie's feelings in this regard were likely intuitive rather than the result of any careful consideration. Burke famously broke from contemporaries and condemned the French Revolution, correctly predicting that its Rousseau-inspired call to equality and social redistribution at the point of a bayonet would lead to chaos and atrocity on a mass scale.

This is not to suggest that Bowie read Burke in depth, though he was likely familiar with his ideas. Nor is it to suggest that Bowie saw parallels between Burke's political philosophy and aspects of his own life. It is only to point out that there are a number of "stations" across the continuum of the philosophical right: radical liberty, or freedom, positioned at one end; Burke's careful balancing of forward movement against the lessons of history and tradition inhabiting the middle; and at the other extreme an impulse toward authoritarianism that can devolve into fascism. At various points during his career, particularly in the 1970s, Bowie passed through each of these mindsets. There seemed to be some serious cognitive dissonance occurring in 1976, when Bowie simultaneously flirted with ideas of Aryan supremacy while carrying on numerous affairs with black women while also recording an album, *Station to Station*, infused with Jewish mysticism. There is a lesson to be learned here: playing personal host to a rather extreme marketplace of ideas while subsisting only on cocaine and milk is bound to destabilize one's psyche. But if the pivot to fascism constituted a surprising and alarming development, it at least had identifiable roots in Bowie's earlier preoccupation with Nietzsche. Taken in the context of the ego-distorting, funhouse mirror world of the rock star, you can almost see how he got from point A to point B, even if you want to look away from it as from a particularly nasty automobile accident. At any rate, after an ill-advised Hitler salute and an interview in which he speculated on his chances of becoming England's first fascist prime minister, Bowie went back to the ideological drawing board and re-emerged with a sensible antipathy toward political absolutes. A number of years later, Bowie summarized his feelings on politics:

I think that unless one has a penetrating understanding of the social issues of the time, it's very dangerous to get involved in other areas where one might be misled by forces who would take you off the path. It's very important not to be led, and in political areas I think it's very dodgy for a lot of artists—including myself—who have only an understanding of the topsoil of the political and social system to declare themselves under any political banner.

This remained his default public setting for the remainder of his career. Privately he identified as a liberal, though it is intriguing that his longtime friend Gary Oldman, the actor and noted contrarian, listed Bowie and conservative commentator Charles Krauthammer as two individuals who "speak the truth in this culture" during his infamous PC-bashing interview with *Playboy* in 2014. Oldman was primarily speaking here of Bowie's artistic autonomy, and how that afforded Bowie the ability to convey his per-

sonal truth, but it seems at least possible that in his pairing of Bowie with Krauthammer, Oldman was also thinking of his friend's lifelong refusal to adhere to received wisdom in all realms, including politics.

Bowie evidently shared at least some of Edmund Burke's views on revolution and mass-movement idealism, and privately he occasionally fretted about the excesses of his own libertine lifestyle. When informed by his first wife, Angela, that they were expecting a child, Bowie wondered aloud whether Haddon Hall, the rented mansion where the Bowies, along with a menagerie of transitory lovers of both genders, spent their days seemingly re-enacting the Kama Sutra along with passages of de Sade, might be an "awkward" environment for the raising of his son. This brief intrusion of common sense proved more an exception than the norm during this period, however.

Bowie's privately conservative—or, if you'd prefer, conventional—side was explored in depth by no less an authority than his biographer Christopher Sandford in a tribute piece for *The American Conservative* titled "Thin Right Duke," wherein Sandford humorously called attention to Bowie's "flagrantly unfashionable belief in sound traditional values such as those he called 'self denial, discipline and constant graft,' along with a refreshing ability to get through lengthy autobiographical interviews without whining, blaming, or emoting." Over a subsequent email exchange, Sandford elaborated on this aspect of Bowie's personality:

I know the words "conservative" and "ordinary" aren't the ones that normally leap to mind when discussing DB, but I always got that impression of him. I remember several people telling me how even at the nadir/zenith of the coked-out Thin White Duke days his fundamental idea of a good time was to sit alone watching British sitcoms on TV, and/or to curl up with a good book.

Obviously, the label of "ordinary" may seem at first to complicate our idea of Bowie as the exemplary individual. But it need not. Sandford's own book on Bowie, *Loving the Alien*, is filled with tales of his subject (as one interviewee put it) "fucking everything that moved and quite a lot that didn't," sniffling cocaine at boardroom meetings, exorcising malevolent swimming pools, and storing his own urine in a refrigerator to ward off spirits and/or vampires.. These are not behaviors that one would typically ascribe to a "conservative" or "ordinary" man. But Bowie himself may have cleared up the apparent discrepancy by describing himself to *Esquire* as "a librarian with a sex drive." Setting aside the entirely unfair aspersions that formulation casts on actual librarians, and factoring out drug psychosis (which likely contributed to the more outlandish behaviors listed above), that one sentence does a fairly good job of making peace between the two poles of his personality. Bowie was, essentially, a quiet, bookish man possessed of a powerful sexual urge, one which, due to his tremendous success, he found himself uniquely positioned to indulge. Cocaine fortified his nerves in engaging with the external world, though it also contributed to behaviors that we might call "batshit crazy."

In the public arena the "conservative" aspects Sandford noted rarely asserted themselves. When they did, the effect could be memorable and sometimes jarring. An early indicator of this side of Bowie came in "Word on a Wing," an unabashed plea to the Christian God nestled alongside the otherwise Kabbalistic and occult-preoccupied songs that comprised the *Station to Station* LP from 1976. "Lord, I kneel and offer you my word on a wing," Bowie sang. "And I'm trying hard to fit among your scheme of things." Then there was the apparently spontaneous moment at a Freddie Mercury tribute concert in 1992 when Bowie fell to his knees and recited the Lord's Prayer to a bewildered audience, his voice choking up on the words "forgive us our trespasses." In moments like these, particularly given Bowie's wild image, the conventional became radical. There are few gestures more shocking in the Dionysian world of rock-and-roll than that of one of the perceived agents of society's downfall humbling himself—not before his audience but before the God of his forebears—and offering up an explicitly sectarian prayer. Madonna's dance in front of burning crosses in her "Like a Prayer" video pales in comparison. In an interview with *Rolling Stone* the following year, Bowie acknowledged that the gesture, inspired by a friend who was dying of AIDS, had surprised his listeners that night. "But," he added, "it wasn't for them."

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