

The David Bowie Experience
Thoughts on *David Bowie Is* from a Ziggy Fanatic
By Bailey Holtz

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Like the legendary space wanderer, I have voyaged across the universe, and bring fantastical news to the Midwest, of an event occurring in the far reaches of Brooklyn. That event is *David Bowie Is*, the David Bowie exhibition that has landed at the Brooklyn Museum as the final stop on its global journey. The exhibition, which was organized by the Victoria and Albert museum, has garnered wide praise and for its expansiveness and thoroughness as regards the Bowie legacy.

Before I get to the exhibition, let me briefly tell you a little bit about who I am: last year, I wrote, produced, and starred in a short film called *Jammy Spaceplace!*, about a Ziggy Stardust-like hedonistic former rock star who travels from a place called Glam Heaven back to Earth. For this, I paid a woman on Etsy, who specializes in celebrity costume replicas, to make a costume for me. I bought a bright red mullet wig. I hired a makeup artist to execute a Ziggy makeup design. I submitted to having my face airbrushed white every day. I purchased, on an anachronistic and somewhat shady website, a pair of silver platform boots. My fascination with Ziggy has, like a glittering poison, seeped into my veins, has made me weird, and has probably lost me friends. Where many of my personal traits can be lifted off without hurting my core essence, removing my Ziggy-ness would collapse me.

So, that's a little about me.

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Once you have made it past the gallery attendant whose ineptitude you suffer only because you are in Brooklyn and this is what you must expect, you are given a headset. You thus spend most of your time in the exhibit clamped firmly between two cushy Sennheiser headphones.

You then turn to your right and are treated to a most excellent opening image: Bowie's iconic Kansai Yamamoto costume standing beneath glowing lightbulbs that spell out "Bowie." He wore this," I thought to myself. The air crackled with anticipation.

And with that tantalizing nugget of glamour, the fun is over and it's time to learn. We start with Bowie's adolescent years. Here we see a Bowie hungry, exposed, searching for an identity. As an aspiring artist and writer myself, this section was interesting because it functions as a sort of how-to manual for achieving fame.

Rule number one: Be image-conscious. Care about what other people think of you, and work rigorously to cultivate a persona.

Rule number two: Want desperately, terribly, unabashedly, to be famous.

Rule number three: Be in touch with popular cultural phenomena, and make art about that. It should be somewhat different from the original thing, but not too different.

Rule number four: Have unfailing, unwavering faith in yourself. Believe without a shadow of a doubt that you have what it takes to succeed. Eschew any influences in your life that might tell you otherwise, for instance, band members.

Rule number five: Be willing to go solo.

Rule number six: Be born into ideal circumstances to foster your creativity and self-esteem. This could involve having supportive, moneyed parents, being male, having exquisite and totally marketable looks, having musical talent. Actually, it must involve all the above.

As I tallied these rules in my head, I could have let them discourage me. David Bowie was, the exhibit painstakingly explained to me, the product of an incredible convergence of strong talent and fortuitous circumstance; a man with a dream and the means to make it come true. And yet instead I felt exhilarated. The hiccups, the false starts, the paths wrongly pursued - this was all acceptable because they preceded the legend. The good part was still to come.

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And the good part was good. My Ziggy dreams were brought to life through a projection of three versions of *Space Oddity*, in which Bowie engages all manner of psychedelic space tomfoolery. After that, I floated to a projection of his performance of *Starman* on Top of the Pops, where he wore his quilted jumpsuit and looked provocatively through the camera, and into my very soul. This was the legend I came all the way out to Brooklyn to see. It might have just been the light from the projection, but I think I was glowing a bit.

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Moving into the next room, though, which explored his post-Ziggy work, the flush left my face. It turns out that I knew little to nothing about any of David Bowie's forty-year career after Ziggy Stardust. And I realized immediately that I didn't much care to.

Bowie seemed to have traded in color, glamour, and fun for darkness, depravity, and senseless violence. Walls were covered with his dreams of dystopian universes, hideous costumes and hand-written notes evincing an obsession with German Expressionism. The only trace left of Ziggy were two of his costumes, the one-legged jumpsuit and the blue space suit with the lightning bolt emblazoned across the back, which were perched twenty feet above us, atop the panels, too saccharine and childish, evidently, for public consumption.

This couldn't have been further from the delicious glam of Ziggy. I felt betrayed. How could the person who created Ziggy also have created *Station to Station*, and *Diamond Dogs*? It was like I had just learned about human reproduction, and I desperately tried to claw my way back to innocence. But the damage was done. I knew too much.

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Of course, any human with more sense than I have would have been able to anticipate this disappointment. I created an image of David Bowie in my mind, and to learn the truth about the man is synonymous with anticlimax. But, in my defense, is this not the nature of stardom? Stars are unknowable to us – they are larger-than-life beings, distant from our own little existences – and so we project our own images onto them. We use them to lend meaning to our lives, and to provide lenses through which to interpret them. Stars are here to be appropriated. Otherwise they provide us with nothing other than jealousy of their good fortune, and *maybe* some good music.

So, to create a scholarly exhibition about a star seems paradoxical. Stars aren't yours or mine to dissect and analyze; they belong to all of us. Particularly for a celebrity as mutable as Bowie, whose artistic phases are so divergent that few people could connect with more than two or three of them, laying bare his entire career seems like a cruel trick on his fans. (I am making this argument, of course, on a purely personal level, not on a political one. The world would be a terrible place if we sacrificed truth for romance.)

Bleck, I thought, standing beneath the Alexander McQueen Union Jack coat. Ugly.

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I contemplated for a while leaving, cutting my losses for the day and finding a snack. But I knew I would be asked for a report on my experience, and felt I couldn't walk out of the museum event of the year. My spirits, however, were at an all-time low.

Trudging gloomily through the final leg of the exhibition, I approached a new room with a sign outside that asked visitors to remove their headphones. I did so, relieved only to escape the cries of disappointment echoing in my skull, and stepped inside.

The room was, unlike the rest of the dense exhibition, spacious, largely devoid of displays and signs. A glut of visitors sat and stood in a glowing rectangle formed by three thirty-foot screens mounted on the walls. On them, a larger-than-life Bowie pranced across stage in his Ziggy costume, while Suffragette City blasted through hidden speakers.

I stared up at him, that androgynous alien voyager of my dreams, watched him spin, leap, thrust, seduce me. I looked around. It seemed, for the first time, that visitors were enjoying themselves. No doubt we should have been interested in the displays of ephemera, and the pages of notes and drawings. Instead, we were drawn to the footage of Bowie performing, Bowie in action, Bowie being Bowie.

When *Changes* came on, a short, squat man with grey hair started dancing next to me, though I can use the word "dancing" only in the loosest sense. The man tapped each foot out in front of him, and, once a foot was placed, paused, and shifted his torso mechanically to the right or left,

his arms swaying limply in accompaniment of these motions, but otherwise not possessing any self-created movement. It reminded me of a warm up I did in an exercise class once.

Not a soul in that room raised an eyebrow at him. We all got it. As I found myself glowing once again in the lights of the projected images, I realized that the exhibition, while impeccably researched, got something fundamentally wrong: We don't want to know about David Bowie. We just want to experience him.