

Hang On To Your Self

Performance and Persona
in the work of David Bowie
by James O'Callaghan

The act of performing necessarily involves the creation of persona. On the most basic level, persona is defined as a role adopted by a performer; there is in all cases (however distinct or visible) a degree of difference between the performing self and the non-performing self. This notion is particularly complex in the performance of popular music. An illustrative example of this is in the work of David Bowie, within whom can be seen multiple layers of persona. There exists, presumably, the real person, the persona of the rock star, the personae created through narrative in song, and peculiarly in Bowie's case, the creation of characters as a vehicle through which his performance is communicated. As these multiple layers of personae infiltrated further into his life, they became conflated. He therefore presents an example through which these theoretically distinct levels of performed identity are blurred and problematic.

Before beginning an analysis of Bowie's career and characters, it will be instructive to elaborate on this notion of persona as 'performed identity'. Philip Auslander provides a keen insight into this concept of persona. He describes it as "a performed presence that is neither a fictional character nor equivalent to the performer's 'real' identity."¹ From this brief definition, two key concepts emerge. Firstly, persona is something that is *performed*, and inextricably linked to performance; thus, it is something created through performance actions. And secondly, it is something that occupies the space *between* the presumably more defined 'real identity' and character. However, it has a relationship with these things as well, and therefore it is constructive to consider the performance identity as one which operates on several layers. A performer is simultaneously him or herself, the persona portrayed through performance, and possibly any number of characters as well. This continuum draws an interesting parallel between Richard Schechner's concept of 'acting vs. not-acting.'

"At one extreme is the minimal acting or even not acting of some performance art. At the other extreme is the total acting of shamans and the

¹ Auslander, Philip. *Performing Glam Rock*. Pg 4.

trance-possessed. Acting consists of focused, clearly marked and framed behaviours specifically designed for showing. At the not-acting end of the spectrum, there is no portrayal of another or of a character. The minimalist actor simply performs certain actions that are received as acting by spectators because of the context. By contrast, in total acting, the “other” is so powerful that it takes over or possesses the performer.”²

At the very least, then, any performance presumes at least a very minimal sense of acting, as a means to 'showing'. And each discipline or format has its own set of “clearly marked and framed behaviours”. In performing rock music, these behaviours have become quite codified, and one performs the persona of the 'rock star' by acting them out.

One of the conventions that is strongly evident in constructing a somewhat separate performer is in the adoption of stage names. In Bowie's case, the 'real' person is David Jones, but as a performer, he is David Bowie. The establishment of a different name signals quite clearly that there is a difference in identity between the real self and the performed self. This distinction is not always so clear, however.

“The demarcation line between real person and persona is always ambiguous in performance, for, as Richard Schechner points out, performance is always a matter of the performers not being themselves but also not not being themselves. This logic of the double negative is represented in one way by the professional names sometimes used by pop music performers, names that initially designate their personae but are later generalized to the real people. David Jones renamed himself David Bowie; David Bowie is not David Jones, yet he is also not not David Jones, as suggested by the fact that the name David Bowie now belongs to both the real person and the performance persona.”³

There is a degree of bleed-through, then. Where does one use one name and where the other? In legal documents, possibly at home, to his family, he is still David Jones. His children have adopted that last name. Even that arena is not so clear, however, as his first son was initially referred to as “Zowie Bowie”, with the full name of Duncan Zowie Haywood Jones, later adopting 'Joey Bowie' and finally 'Duncan Jones'. Because of David Bowie's great success under that name, he is consistently known to most by that name and uses it in interviews and everyday conversation. It has, to a very large extent, been amalgamated into the 'real person' and the separation between that and his

2 Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies : An Introduction*. pg. 174

3 Auslander, Philip. *Performing Glam Rock*. Pg 5.

stage persona is not so clean-cut as a result.

While the adoption of stage names is a very illustrative example of the development of performer persona, it is a small part of a large group of concepts and actions that are linked to it. A performer adopts an entire vocabulary of gestures, movements and habits which develop persona. Though some of these are quirks of individual performers, many have become relatively universal actions repeated by many different performers, becoming codified within the field of rock music. Thus, there is a whole series of images and movements to tap into; there is *something that it is like* to perform rock music, and it is a distinct something. And so, a performer of rock music to some degree adopts the archetype of the rock star, and the behaviours it contains, as his or her persona, combined with whatever personal additions they provide to that role, all on top of their 'real identity'.

Despite this, there is a tendency for 'authenticity' to be held in value in rock music performance. There is a feeling (especially among rock critics) that the person presented on stage should be the 'real person', and present his or her own thoughts in their lyrics.⁴ Indeed, there is an expectation to, as "the audience generally infers what performers are like as real people from their performance personae and the characters they portray."⁵ And so, while the notion of authenticity of a performer is inherently problematic, the ease of conflating the persona with the real person leads many to believe that the person portrayed on stage is an authentic presentation of the real person. This is unfortunately ironic, for as Auslander points out, "the real person is the dimension of performance to which the audience has the least direct access."⁶ This only becomes apparently problematic to most viewers when stage persona is augmented by the performance of defined characters separate from the performer's identity, such as those David Bowie has famously created.

Bowie is not necessarily unique in creating characters in rock music. Indeed, most

4 Sanjek, David. "Pleasure and principles. Issues of authenticity in the analysis of rock 'n' roll."

5 Auslander, Philip. *Performing Glam Rock*. Pg 6.

6 *Ibid*

performers of popular music create characters to some degree. They are embedded in the lyrics of the songs they sing. To whatever degree those characters resemble the performers themselves, they are in some sense 'acted out' in the performers' song. Because this is an established tradition, it does not come to most as a blow to authenticity. What does is when these characters are made evident through explicit *characterizations* by the performer. David Bowie recalls,

“I saw that a lot of my songs were very illustrative or picturesque, and I felt that there were other ways of performing them. I was never very confident with my voice as a singer, and so I thought, rather than just sing them, which would bore the pants off of everyone, I would like to portray the songs[...] I wanted to give them some other dimension other than that of just being a song[...]

It was my initial fascination with mime and expressing things with facial movements and body talk rather than articulating things. I'd done as much articulating as I felt was necessary with the actual songs, and if I was going to present them in more than one dimension... then I wanted my body or my muscles to play an active part in the performance.”⁷

Much has been made of Bowie's brief training in mime theatre with Lindsay Kemp, and admittedly it is likely that this provided him the basis for a more theatrical understanding of rock performance. Bowie sounds very much like an actor here. Indeed, read as though he were an actor, what he says seems almost trite, or at least obvious; but as a rock musician, it was (and still is) quite radical to think of performing rock music in these terms.

The critical reaction he received in many circles illustrates this. The American Rock critic Lester Bangs, steeped in the idiom of rock-as-authenticity, continually berated Bowie's theatricality. In Creem's review of Bowie's 1974 Album, *Diamond Dogs*, he complained of Bowie's “same old theatrical delivery,” referring to it as “sterilely distasteful artifice.”⁸ The terms 'theatrical' and 'artifice' here are used as though they are derogatory, and this is because of the paradigm of authenticity. “The 'official' rock culture of the 1970s (represented especially by critics) often found it hard to embrace Bowie because his actorly stances made it impossible to equate his performances with the real person[... ..]When a musician, like a film actor, is closely identified with a single persona, it becomes easier to imagine that person, however

⁷ David Bowie qtd. in: *Cracked Actor: A Film About David Bowie*. Dir. Alan Yentoub.

⁸ Bangs, Lester. “Swan Dive into the Mung.” 118-119

artificial, as an authentic expression of the performer's self. Bowie's distinctive refusal of this kind of continuity in favour of the stage actor's continual transformation from role to role set him apart from rock culture."⁹ The real difficulty, here, then is indeed in the schism in between layers of persona. There seems to be an inherent mistrust in the 'duplicity' of theatre. It is accepted in the theatre, as it is an established tradition, but supplanted into the alien world of rock performance, it has an unsettling effect.

Whether this was Bowie's goal or not, he fully embraced this theatricality in the first decade of his recording career, especially in the creation of characters. While this is evident even on his little-known first record for Deram in 1967, in which he sings in different accents and from the viewpoints of different characters, it wasn't until the elaboration of a major character in his 1972 album, *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and The Spiders From Mars*, that his theatricality became evident on stage and in the public eye. The character of Ziggy Stardust is, in Bowie's own words, "the archetype messiah rock star."¹⁰ This particular character is very interesting because it is self-reflexive. As a performer of rock music, Bowie already performs the persona of the rock star. By making it explicit as a character, he exaggerates the behaviours associated with that persona into hyper-reality. The affect is almost absurd, but what it does is deconstruct the notion of rock persona, and more importantly, brings attention to it. Bowie is saying 'this is a rock performance, and this is what a rock performer looks like and how he behaves.' A systematic dissection of the medium in which an artist had been working simply had not been done in rock music. Bowie has made it evident since that rather than Ziggy developing out of a rock persona, the reverse was actually the case. That is to say, because Bowie had made the character of Ziggy, he made rock music. He made efforts afterward to establish that he was "not part of rock and roll," stating, "I just use rock."¹¹ And so, in an effort to describe artistically the character of the rock star, he used the medium best-suited to the task: rock music.

9 Auslander, Philip. *Performing Glam Rock*. Pg 112.

10 David Bowie qtd. in *This Hour Has 5 Decades*. CBC. 25 Nov. 1977.

11 *Ibid.*

To further confuse things, the record and the lyrics it contained actually spoke from multiple viewpoints and multiple characters, often within the same song. If rock performers do create characters as their stage performers, it is often viewed as acceptable because these characters can be conflated with the 'real' performer. It is particularly because Bowie performed as many different characters, not just over the course of his career, but within a given album or stage act, that his theatricality and the complexity of his many layers of persona becomes evident. For the stage act of Ziggy Stardust, Bowie chose the title character as his 'spokesman' and performed as him during his concerts. He completely changed his wardrobe and hair, donned makeup and jewellery, and shaved off his eyebrows, in order to physically portray an ambisexual alien rock messiah.

“Ziggy Stardust... [acted as] a third term that triangulated the relationship between Bowie and the characters in his songs. Ziggy, rather than Bowie, became the actor who impersonated the characters delineated in the songs, yet Ziggy was also a fictional entity enacted by Bowie. Revealed on stage, the “real person” who portrayed the characters in the recordings turned out not to be a real person at all. Just to make matters more complex, Ziggy was himself a character from one of Bowie's songs, meaning that Ziggy was sometimes singing about himself.”¹²

To complicate the matter further, in the character of Ziggy, Bowie brought out another performance: the performance of gender and sexuality. The character of Ziggy was androgynous and bisexual, and so Bowie adopted these characteristics on-stage and off. He adopted a feminine appearance in his make-up and clothes, and physical gestures associated with queer culture. What was misunderstood by many critics and fans is that this was very much a conscious performance. “Bowie's presentation of his sexuality[...] suggests a perception of such identities as performative, not expressive. His performance of a gay or bisexual identity did not express some essential quality of his person; it was, rather, a performance of signs that are socially legible as constituting a gay identity.”¹³ And so, Bowie adopted the mannerisms and clothing choices that would read as queer. He adopted these and amalgamated them into his character and stage act consciously as a performance. “Often referred to as 'costuming' and 'creating a persona,' Bowie and other glitter

¹²Auslander, Philip. *Performing Glam Rock*. Pg 120.

¹³ Auslander, Philip. *Performing Glam Rock*. Pg 135.

rockers *implied* that one could 'try on lifestyles' within the framework of rock and roll and not always 'take on the consequences.'"¹⁴ Whether or not these performances of gender and sexuality reflected his 'real' sexual identity, they brought attention to themselves *as performative*. They were as calculated as the other performative aspects Bowie compiled into Ziggy, such as the 'alien-ness' and the mannerisms of a rock star. In each of these cases, however, the line between the character and the real person behind him were continually blurred, as Bowie, in true method-actor fashion, performed Ziggy off-stage as well as on.

Bowie famously 'outed' himself in an interview for melody maker in 1972, but the validity of this supposedly personal confession is questionable in the context of his performance of character in interviews. Never did it go so far that he ask to be called "Ziggy" in interviews, but he adopted the same vocabulary of gesture and mannerism that he portrayed on stage, and certainly the same costumes. While Bowie had mentioned many times that these were effects of the character he had developed, the temptation to conflate the performed identity with the performer's 'real' identity, because of the paradigm of authenticity in rock, caused many to take every word Bowie spoke as Ziggy as his own. Van M. Cagle relates Bowie's performative interviews to those of Andy Warhol. "In Bowie and Warhol's terms, the media were *never* to be taken at face value; the media's most revered forms (the interview, the gossip column, the feature story) were points for strategic intervention. These were the passageways that both Bowie and Warhol fully exploited."¹⁵ Unfortunately, few understood this, and as Bowie continued to perform Ziggy, more and more aspects of Ziggy's personality crept into his own. As much as it was difficult for fans to tell the two apart, it became difficult for Bowie himself.¹⁶ And while Bowie had never planned to continue as Ziggy forever, he began to feel it was necessary to finish the role, and in a concert in 1973 he declared, "Of all the shows on the tour this one will remain with us the longest not only because it is the last show of the tour, but it's the last show we'll ever

14 Cagle, Van M. *Reconstructing Pop/Subculture : Art, Rock, and Andy Warhol*. Pg 11-12

15 *Ibid.* Pg 4.

16 David Bowie in 'Tonight' with Valerie Singleton. BBC. 12 Feb. 1979.

do.”¹⁷ Bowie was referring to the death of Ziggy Stardust, and the retirement of his backing band, The Spiders From Mars, but because so many had conflated Ziggy with Bowie himself, most people truly believed that David Bowie was retiring from music.

Of course, Bowie continued to perform, but the spirit of Ziggy haunted him in his following two characters, Aladdin Sane and Halloween Jack, who were each not a bit unlike Ziggy in more than physical appearance. The role of Ziggy had carried over into his other performances, as well as his personal life. Perhaps Bowie began to believe he was a rock messiah similar to his character, Ziggy Stardust. Neither of these characters were as developed as their predecessor¹⁸, nor did they attract as much public attention and confusion. Perhaps audiences had caught on to the act. However, Bowie did have an interesting remark about Aladdin Sane. “[He] was a schizophrenic; this accounted for lots of the wonders and the costume changes. Because he had so many personalities, as far as I was concerned, each costume change was a different facet of his personality.”¹⁹ This idea of costume change as identity is crucial to Bowie's stage acts in the early 70's. Bowie could try on new costumes, new genders, and new identities.

By 1975, Bowie had begun to make music in a different genre: blue-eyed soul. He abandoned the performance of explicit characters and theatrical productions. It could be viewed as the first of many attempts to shake of the identity of his characters that had pervaded his own life, and re-establish or re-define his own personal identity. But the performance of the soul-singer was as contrived as the others. The clothing and mannerisms he adopted fit the idiom perfectly, and he adhered to a new exaggerated archetype. If by putting on make-up with Ziggy he was able to 'try on' gender and queer identity, so too by singing soul, he was able to 'try on' race. “This performer's persona was as carefully constructed and managed as Ziggy's, yet different from Ziggy in almost all respects. This persona, the white, British soul boy living out a fantasy of being black, was Bowie's

17 Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars: The Motion Picture. Dir. D. A. Pennebaker.

18 As much as anything, Aladdin Sane was 'amalgamated into' the Ziggy persona; They existed concurrently, and during Bowie's 1973 shows he was simultaneously Ziggy and Aladdin Sane; representing the material from two different records. There were some unique additions to wardrobe and persona with the coming of Aladdin Sane, but Bowie himself and certainly his audience tended to view these as additions to Ziggy, rather than a separate act.

19 David Bowie qtd. in: Cracked Actor: A Film About David Bowie. Dir. Alan Yentoub.

next role.”²⁰ Bowie's entire backing band at this time consisted of African Americans, and his musical style and dress emulated black culture in every way. Bowie was consciously aware of the artifice of this, so far as to call the genre he was now working in “plastic soul”. The title is almost an oxymoron and brings attention to its constructed and contrived nature. The name is also interesting in light of studying the performing of identity. Plastic soul or plastic persona? Bowie adopted this persona again offstage as well as on; but the venues in which he disseminated this new stage act changed. He had moved from Britain to America, and became the first white artist to perform on *Soul Train*. But, because this new character was not explicit in that it was not given a name, critics began to equate it with the real David Bowie. Lester Bangs, who had previously denounced Bowie's artifice, found the apparent authenticity in this new act more appealing. “Bowie has dropped his pretensions... and in doing that I believe he's finally become an artist instead of a poseur.”²¹ But Bowie's soul act is just as constructed, just as posed as Ziggy was; it became merely a matter of whether the method of delivery of this posing was viewed as 'authentic' or not, as it seems apparent that in the paradigm of rock-authenticity, the idea of posing, or performing, really, is at odds with artistry. I would not hesitate to assert that 'art' is the etymological root of 'artifice'.

Bowie's exploration of soul music continued into his next project, *Station To Station*, but it was conglomerated unexpectedly with more European musical techniques, particularly those borrowed from *krautrock*. The resultant work spawned a new explicit character, the Thin White Duke. The fact that the name came from the title of an unpublished autobiography Bowie was working on, to be titled 'The Return of the Thin White Duke', is a striking indicator of how blurred these many characters were becoming with Bowie's own life. He continued in his tradition as before of taking this character out into the press. The unfortunate result of which was the character's association with Nazi imagery being conflated with Bowie's assumed interest in the subject. The public backlash to his toying with fascistic themes was more burdensome on him than the reaction to his toying with bisexuality four years earlier. The results of his characterization this time quite

20 Auslander, Philip. *Performing Glam Rock*. Pg 149.

21 Bangs, Lester. “Chicken Head Comes Home To Roost.” pg. 132-133.

negatively effected his public image, and the resulting schizoid amalgamation of these characters began to quite negatively effect his own personal identity. All the while, he had been fostering an increasingly extensive cocaine addiction which was having its own effects on his personal identity.

His decision in 1976 to abandon characters, abandon America, and kick off his addiction was a necessary one to the preservation of his self: physically and mentally. In the meantime, he took on another type of performance, in his first film role. Bowie later recalls his experience as a film actor “I was working with Nicolas Roeg in *The Man Who Fell To Earth*... and he warned me that when one's finished a film, the role often carries over for many months after the film, and that I should be prepared for that. I think that happened to me when I was performing the characters I was performing in America and England, but I didn't have a director to tell me that they would carry over, and so they all built up and became a mess, sort-of conglomerate character.”²² And thus began an attempt to regain a sense of personal identity. Returning to Schechner's continuum from 'not-acting' to 'total acting', it appears that Bowie's performances gradually became more in the vein of the latter category, and his own personal identity came under threat from the 'other' identities he was performing. To re-iterate Schechner's quote, “in total acting, the “other” is so powerful that it takes over or possesses the performer.”²³ This notion of being 'possessed' is a quite frightening description of the process of acting, but the metaphor is useful and descriptive in detailing the effects of Bowie's collection of characters and their relationship with his ego. When discussing the performing of his characters in an interview in 1979, he confessed that he had “lost control a few times”²⁴. At the beginning of the same interview, the host remarks, “Yet another David Bowie. Is this the real one this time?” To which he can only respond, “I think so.”²⁵ It is clear that the extent to which Bowie had developed a complicated array of personae had a remarkable effect on his own 'real' identity. While the notion of 'self' is itself philosophically problematic, and 'real' identity can be viewed as a performance just

22 David Bowie qtd. in 'Tonight' with Valerie Singleton. BBC. 12 Feb. 1979.

23 Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies : An Introduction*. pg. 174

24 David Bowie qtd. in 'Tonight' with Valerie Singleton. BBC. 12 Feb. 1979.

25 *Ibid*

as much as as persona can, the clear blurring of the boundaries between the two in the case of David Bowie highlights the problematic nature of these distinctions.

Bowie did not return to using characters again until 1995 for his album, *1. Outside*, at which point they were never taken off stage and served their brief existence as fictional beings in a very contained manner. By then, Bowie was a much more self-assured man, and whether some of his audience continues to think of him as Ziggy Stardust or The Thin White Duke, he is to himself David Bowie. ...And David Jones. Still, the performer's identity is complex. That is inescapable. But it is evident that Bowie can now manage that complexity. What his career illustrates is how dynamic the layers of a performer's persona are (or can be) and the dangers within that in terms of issues of identity. He is a particularly illustrative example of performer persona because of his many explicit characters, but hopefully, he can also serve as an indicator of the complexity of persona present in all rock performances, and all performance in general. What he shows also is that performance and persona are inextricably linked, and that a better understanding of how they relate is necessary in studying performance.

Bibliography

Texts:

Auslander, Philip. *Performing Glam Rock : Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music*. New York: University of Michigan P, 2006.

Bangs, Lester. "Chicken Head Comes Home To Roost." *The Bowie Companion*. Ed. Elizabeth Thomson and David Gutman. New York. Da Capo Press, 1996. 130-133.

Bangs, Lester. "Swan Dive into the Mung." *The Bowie Companion*. Ed. Elizabeth Thomson and David Gutman. New York. Da Capo Press, 1996. 117-19.

Cagle, Van M. *Reconstructing Pop/Subculture : Art, Rock, and Andy Warhol*. Minneapolis: SAGE Publications, Incorporated, 1995.

Sanjek, David. "Pleasure and principles. Issues of authenticity in the analysis of rock 'n' roll." *Tracking: Popular Music Studies* 4 (1992). http://www.icce.rug.nl/~soundscapes/DATABASES/TRA/Pleasure_and_principles.shtml

Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies : An Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Films:

Cracked Actor: A Film About David Bowie. Dir. Alan Yentoub. DVD. 1975.

Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars: The Motion Picture. Dir. D. A. Pennebaker. DVD. 1973.

Interviews:

This Hour Has 5 Decades. CBC. 25 Nov. 1977.

'Tonight' with Valerie Singleton. BBC. 12 Feb. 1979.