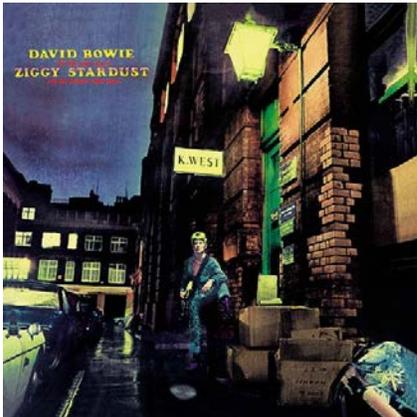


“The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars”—David Bowie (1972)

Added to the National Registry: 2016

Essay by Susan E. Booth



“Ziggy” album cover



Original label



David Bowie

“Ziggy Stardust played this instrument in the eponymous track of the famed 1972 concept album ‘The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars.’”

“What is a ‘Guitar?’”

“That is correct! You may choose the next category.”

“Prophetic Rock ‘n’ Roll Aliens for \$400, Alex.”

The influence of the aforementioned album is so-far reaching that undoubtedly, like our fictional “Jeopardy!” contestant, you could finish the phrase “Ziggy played... guitar.”

Released on June 16, 1972, David Bowie’s “The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars” is a concept album which tells the story of the fictional rock star Ziggy Stardust. Let me explain. No, there is too much. Let me sum up: Due to a depletion of natural resources, humanity has reached its final five years of existence (“Five Years”) and its only hope exists in the form of an alien messiah (“Moonage Daydream”). Ziggy Stardust, the consummate rock star (a drug-using, omnisexual human manifestation of an alien being), acts as the messenger, with his band, the Spiders from Mars, on behalf of extraterrestrial beings called “starmen.” The message, beneath a hedonistic facade, ultimately communicates the time-honored rock ‘n’ roll theme of peace and love: a starman will come save Earth (“Starman”). He communicates this message to the youth of the world, who, having lost the desire to rock ‘n’ roll, become enthralled. Ziggy, however, is ultimately destroyed on stage (“Rock ‘n’ Roll Suicide”), his fate sealed by a decadence that only fame can encourage. (The same means by which *many* rockstars contribute to their own demise.)

The tragic flaw of the special man, not unlike a Hellenistic hero, is hubris. In the track “Ziggy Stardust,” one is reminded of Icarus, Ziggy having “... made it too far.” After all, this album chronicles both the rise *and* fall of our hero. Bowie describes the ego attributed to our prophet to William S. Burroughs in a 1974 “Rolling Stone” interview:

Ziggy starts to believe in all this himself and thinks himself a prophet of the future starmen. He takes himself up to the incredible spiritual heights and is kept alive by his disciples. When the infinites arrive, they take bits of Ziggy to make themselves real, because in their original state they are anti-matter and cannot exist on our world. And they tear him to pieces onstage during the song “Rock ‘n’ Roll Suicide.”

This subtle commentary on the self-aggrandizement present in rock ‘n’ roll, to levels of divinity, is of course subverted by the beguiling listening experience of the rock album. Bowie also intended the songs “Rebel Rebel” and “Rock ‘n’ Roll with Me” (later recorded for “Diamond Dogs” in 1974) to be included in the full realization of Ziggy’s story in an aborted 1973 Ziggy Stardust musical.

“Ziggy Stardust” is one of the many alter egos of David Bowie (which include Aladdin Sane, or, Ziggy in America; Major Tom; Halloween Jack; the Thin White Duke and Jareth, the Goblin King, to name a few). His Spiders take the form of Mick Ronson (on guitar), Trevor Bolder (bass), and Mick “Woody” Woodmansey (drums), who all reappear on Bowie’s 1973 album “*Aladdin Sane*.” The frontman, however, the messianic alien rockstar, has become synonymous with Bowie, though the character was inspired, in part, by British rockstar Vince Taylor. Taylor, the rockabilly frontman for the Playboys in the ‘50s and ‘60s, after significant drug abuse, declared he was “Mateus, the son of Jesus Christ” and preached his message from the stage. (“Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” was a disciple always in attendance.)

Another influence included the psychobilly rocker Legendary Stardust Cowboy, whose song, “I Took a Trip on a Gemini Spaceship,” Bowie covered on the album “Heathen” (2002). Yet another was Kansai Yamamoto, Bowie’s designer on his Ziggy Stardust Tour. The persona Bowie, with Yamamoto, developed for Ziggy, which depended on performative makeup and costume, has had an influence on the glam rock genre that cannot be understated. The name “Ziggy” itself is inextricably linked to Bowie’s reliance on costume--Bowie explained in a 1990 interview for “Q Magazine” that “Ziggy” came from a tailor’s shop, Ziggy’s, that he had used to pass while on a train.

Perhaps, most strikingly, Ziggy’s death on stage speaks to Bowie’s perception of the work of the glam rock artist. Reflecting on the period from ‘72-‘76, he later said, “Until that time, the attitude was ‘What you see is what you get.’ It seemed interesting to try to devise something different, like a musical where the artist onstage plays a part.” Bowie draws on the rich history of metatheatre to accomplish this kind of metarock: Bowie performing as Ziggy Stardust, the British glam rockstar assuming the role of a prophetic alien rockstar, draws close attention to Bowie’s commentary *on* the role of a rock ‘n’ roll star. This is perhaps most pointedly apparent in “Star”: *I could make a transformation as a rock & roll star*. Later, characterized as a musical “chameleon” (compounded with the visual representations of his alter egos), Bowie, on “Ziggy,” seems to point to, from the outset of his career, an ability to change, adapt, *transform*, as the

mission of a rock star. It is why Ziggy must die. Bowie saw early on the all too easy trap set by the flash-in-the-pan nature of rock 'n' roll. Instead, then, he channeled that energy, which makes the genre so enticing and its fans so impassioned, into a transformative power.

It is precisely why Bowie's—nee Ziggy's--song goes on forever, even when the prophet cannot.

Susan E. Booth is currently working to process and catalog the National Educational Television collection at the Library of Congress' National Audiovisual Conservation Center, for inclusion in the American Archive of Public Broadcasting. She is a recent MSLIS graduate of Simmons College's School of Library and Information Science, where she concentrated in Archives Management.