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## David Bowie: Face the Strange

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## David Bowie: Face the Strange

### Cover Page Footnote

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# David Bowie: Face the Strange

Alannah Egan

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## Abstract

Pop icon David Bowie (1947–2016) was a pioneer in the music industry and the arts as a whole. In addition to his innovations in music, Bowie made strides in the effort to further the acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community and the movement for gay rights. In this paper, I argue that David Bowie used his music and androgynous fashion alongside his personal life to commit himself to the cause of LGBTQ+ rights. I also show how Bowie’s rise to fame coincided with the Space Age and how he capitalized on the public’s excitement over the unknown to illustrate how and why the LGBTQ+ community should be accepted as a valid, integral part of society. This paper explores and solidifies these connections through historical accounts of the time period, personal stories and experiences surrounding David Bowie and the plight of the LGBTQ+ community, theoretical analyses of Bowie’s music, and the discussion of studies regarding David Bowie and his social impact. The immediate goal of this paper is to illustrate Bowie’s contributions to the movement for LGBTQ+ rights, and on a larger scale, this paper serves to convey the importance of music and artists in furthering the fight for social justice of oppressed groups.

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On Saturday, May 28th, 2022, I stood about five yards from the main stage at the Boston Calling Music Festival where the Saturday night headliners, Nine Inch Nails, began playing “I’m Afraid of Americans” by British rock star David Bowie. After over two years of waiting, through a pandemic, political and social turmoil, and the sea of personal struggles that accompanied these life-changing events, a diverse group finally came together to celebrate one cause that unfailingly always brings people together—music. The fact that Nine Inch Nails decided to cover “I’m Afraid of Americans” was symbolic of how this singular performance brought together this crowd, which was full of people hoping to see artists ranging from Avril Lavigne to the Backseat Lovers to, of course, Nine Inch Nails. Not many people today know who Nine Inch Nails are, but those who know them, know them. In sum, they’re an industrial rock “band” from the 1990s. I put “band” in quotations because in reality, the frontman, Trent Reznor, composes and records all of their music on his own and then gathers a group of musicians to perform with him. What’s important to note about Nine Inch Nails is that they are nothing like David Bowie. Or, more accurately, at first glance (or first listen), they are nothing like Bowie. Their dark, almost chaotic sound is vastly different from Bowie’s more upbeat, popular music. However,

when looked at more deeply, the similarities between the two musicians greatly outweigh the differences. They are artists who use their music and fanbase as a way to express themselves and their personal struggles. They defy the expectations of what a traditional rock star or popular music artist should look like, sound like, and what they should write about. Upon further digging, it comes as no surprise that David Bowie is in fact one of the pioneers of this boundary-breaking tradition that many musicians have adopted today. He has directly inspired artists across the musical spectrum, from Nine Inch Nails, Nirvana, and the Smashing Pumpkins to Harry Styles. All of these ideas and lineages of musical inspiration came together in this moment, as a crowd of thousands of people were brought together by this one band covering this one song, after waiting for over two years to experience this exact moment.

Being different has historically required a great degree of bravery and courage to jump into the unknown. Historically, defying arbitrary societal norms resulted in social exile, legal consequences, and in some cases violent physical attacks. Despite these unjust repercussions, there have been brave souls in our history who openly, unapologetically, and publicly fought for their right to exist, to take up space, and to contribute to society even though they do not fit the restrictive molds that have been given to them. Art and music are a reflection of our society, and David Bowie is one of the most notable figures who paved the way for bringing LGBTQ+ issues into the public eye. As Justin Vivian Bond, a drag cabaret performer, notes, “Bowie was not an activist in the traditional sense...but as a visionary and groundbreaking artist Bowie provided a soundtrack and visuals which reshaped our world.” (Bond, 2016). In June 1972, the record label RCA released *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars* (Cromelin, 1972). This album conveys the story of a bisexual, extraterrestrial rock star who came to Earth to share his music before his inevitable death five years after his arrival (McLeod, 2003). The single for this record was “Starman,” released in April of 1972. Performances of “Starman” often incorporated androgynous fashion and displays of sexuality, and its musical lineage traces back to Judy Garland’s “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.” Combined, these aspects transformed it from a single to a melody of LGBTQ+ pride and protest, and thereby turned David Bowie into an LGBTQ+ pop icon. As a whole, the album *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars*, provided a voice and a symbol for the LGBTQ+ community of the time, when such topics were still taboo to most of society. By doing so, this album helped initiate the movement for LGBTQ+ rights.

To set the stage for the rise of David Bowie and his other-worldly persona(s), the late 1950s marked the beginning of the Space Age, and before that the media was increasingly interested in the alien and unknown. As Ken McLeod notes in his 2003 article “Space Oddities: Aliens, Futurism and Meaning in Popular Music,” the 1950s saw a boom in the amount of media created portraying these ideas, with films such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *War of the Worlds* being released in the early 1950s, as well as the publication of many science-fiction magazines and novels. This coincided with the rise of rock and roll as a genre, with most of its pioneering records being released at the same time (McLeod, 2003).

However, while McLeod convincingly argues that this obsession with space allowed for the later acceptance of ideas and lifestyles that strayed from the norm, such as LGBTQ+ culture, it would take years for this idea to take hold socially and politically. In England, for example, homosexuality was only decriminalized with the passing of the Sexual Offences Act of 1967. Similarly, in the United States, the American Psychiatric Association did not remove the classification of homosexuality as a “psychiatric disorder” until 1973 (“The 1960’s”, n.d.). In the public, people who identified as LGBTQ+ were often targets of violent attacks. One such example is of Kenneth Crowe, a teacher in England who was beaten and murdered for dressing in his wife’s clothing (“Sexuality”, 2022). While it appeared that 1950s society was moving forward, given the advancements made in science and space exploration and what these indicated for what was considered “normal,” it was still taboo for anyone to identify with traits that strayed from the white, heterosexual, cisgender norm.

It was into these harsh political and social conditions that David Bowie entered. While he began his career with a more mundane public persona, he quickly became more outrageous—and unapologetically so. Despite the social and political repercussions that came with identifying as LGBTQ+, David Bowie openly embraced his sexual orientation and defied the common misconception of gender being a strict binary. During an interview in January of 1972, Bowie claimed: “I am gay and always have been, even when I was David Jones [David Bowie’s birth name]” (Hewitt, 2016, p. 58). Only six months later, in June of 1972, the legendary album, *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars* was released, bringing to the public a story about “a bi-sexual alien rock superstar” (Hewitt, 2016, p. 53). Numerous writers and music critics agree that this album is what pushed Bowie to the mainstream—an unheard-of accomplishment, as he was the “first English pop star to declare openly his bisexuality.” (Buckley, 2019). Bowie also used this album to explore and promote androgyny. He began exploring androgyny prior to *Ziggy Stardust*—for example, on the cover of the UK version of his 1970 album, *The Man Who Sold the World*, Bowie sports long hair and a dress. However, this album did not sell very well, and so he did not truly bring androgyny to the public eye until *Ziggy Stardust* (Hewitt, 2016). The idea of androgyny, while slightly more familiar to the public due to the popularity of unisex fashion in the late 1960s, was still an incredibly foreign idea to most of the public and was received with rather mixed, generally confused reactions (Segal, 2016). Richard Cromelin, a reporter for Rolling Stone magazine in the 1970s, while praising the music of *Ziggy Stardust*, asserts that “we should all say a brief prayer that his fortunes are not made to rise and fall with the fate of the ‘drag-rock’ syndrome—that thing that’s manifesting itself in the self-conscious quest for decadence which is all the rage at the moment” (Cromelin, 1972). Despite these critiques, Bowie’s gender-norm-defying fashion statements went on to influence famous designers such as Alexander McQueen, Jean-Paul Gaultier, and Tommy Hilfiger (Segal, 2016). Cromelin and others missed the mark. Bowie’s persona was more than a trend, and he was successful on the critical level of bringing the conversation of gender as a spectrum into the mainstream.

Clearly, David Bowie was using his alter ego of Ziggy Stardust as a conduit for his own self-exploration, projecting his struggle of defining his sexual orientation and gender expression onto this alien rockstar. Circling back to the public interest in extraterrestrials at the time, since the purpose of space exploration is to discover the unknown, the public was able to define these aliens and alien ideas however they saw fit. David Bowie took this opportunity to define them as the sexually “deviant,” the gender-bending—LGBTQ+ culture that was counter to the mainstream—and by doing so, he began to give power to these ideas that had been suppressed for so long. This power was exponentially increased following his performance of “Starman” on Top of the Pops in July of 1972. Around a minute into the performance, Bowie casually and affectionately slings his arm around his bandmate Mark Ronson’s shoulder while singing the chorus. As Paolo Hewitt (2016) asserts in his book, *Bowie Album By Album*, “In that one act David Bowie went from being a pop star to a phenomenon” (p. 53). That one moment combined with his androgynous image, then-recent statements about being gay, and the fact that the character he was playing was openly bisexual, made for an incredibly powerful and shocking performance. As one YouTube user notes, it was “[a] different [time] back then.... It was a much more macho culture and any suggestion of being gay was enough to have anyone of both sexes be shocked to the core!” (Mitchell, 2022). Similarly, another YouTube user claims that “it was shocking at the time for the establishment. But not to us star children” (Hubbell, 2020).

It is also important to note “Starman’s” nod to the iconic LGBTQ+ anthem, “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” recorded by Judy Garland. As Sasha Geffen (2020) illustrates in their book *Glitter Up the Dark: How Pop Music Broke the Binary*, “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” was a “recognizable symbol of in-group belonging in twentieth-century gay culture” (p. 34). Historically, this piece has been interpreted as a beacon of hope for members of the LGBTQ+ community to escape the oppression of a heteronormative, white, male society, and find a place “over the rainbow” where LGBTQ+-identifying people “can live openly and fully without judgment, social rancor, and rejection” (Davis, 1996). Similarly, Judy Garland herself is considered “a saint” in gay culture, an emblem of “the diva” that many members of the LGBTQ+ community, especially within the music world, closely identify with. Philip Brett and Elizabeth Wood (2001) refer to this as “the diva effect” in their article, *Gay and Lesbian Music*. Particularly, those who identified as LGBTQ+ and participated in the music industry of the 1990s were attracted to these divas’ “vulnerability...mixed with defiance” (Brett & Wood, 2001). Bowie effectively set the stage for this vulnerability and rejection of societal norms during his performance of “Starman” on Top of the Pops—having recently come out as gay, performing a bisexual character on live television while embracing androgyny, and expressing affectionate gestures toward his same-sex band members, David Bowie was voluntarily subjecting himself to the ridicule of a public that was not ready to accept this boundary-breaking performance.

Interestingly, Sasha Geffen (2020) describes the octave leap that connects “Starman” and “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” as “flamboyant” (p. 34). There are a few reasons why this description is significant despite there being little reference to octave leaps as

“flamboyant” in music theory. Traditionally, Western music theory and voice leading regard an octave as an interval to be avoided. In their textbook, *The Musician’s Guide to Theory and Analysis*, Jane Clendinning and Elizabeth Marvin (2021) assert that due to the hollow acoustic nature of the octave, it should be written carefully and sparsely in counterpoint exercises. Similarly, it is common in music theory classes to intensely discourage the use of leaps by an octave because of this hollow nature. In breaking these traditions of voice leading and part writing, Bowie is working to break musical boundaries and norms that stem from outdated composing practices, which in turn symbolizes his breaking of societal norms regarding gender expression and sexuality that are rooted in outdated, heteronormative, oppressive practices.

Another important song that illustrates David Bowie’s connection between the Space Age and his push for acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community is his 1969 song “Space Oddity,” inspired by Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (McLeod, 2003). The song tells the story of an astronaut whose spaceship experiences mechanical failures and is tragically lost to the abyss. Throughout the piece, Bowie enlists unusual compositional techniques combined with electronic noises to emulate the confusing, unknown feelings associated with the beginning of space exploration (McLeod, 2003). The song also includes the use of a Stylophone—a toy instrument designed for children (Johnson, 2013). The combined use of unfamiliar sounds and toy instruments serves to emphasize how through space exploration, society was forced to revert to a childlike state of wonder and imagination in order to accept the unknown that is inherent in space exploration. This philosophy of being open to the unknown is then applied by Bowie to his ambiguous gender expression and sexuality—Bowie is forcing his listener to question the ethics and morality of their eager acceptance of the unknown as it applies to the Space Age, but their resistance towards the unknown that accompanies minority groups such as the LGBTQ+ community.

A theoretical analysis of “Space Oddity” provides further insight into Bowie’s use of unusual compositional techniques to elicit a sense of floating uncertainty as it pertains to both the Space Age and the acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community. The piece is in C-major, but the instrumental introduction begins with alternating F-major-seventh and E-minor chords. The tonic C-major chord does not appear until the vocal part comes in, acting as Ground Control (table 1.1). This creates an association of the I chord with ideas pertaining to Earth and familiarity, while the prior oscillation between F-major-seven and E-minor is associated with the uncertainty and ambiguity of space. In measure thirty-one, Bowie begins singing as “Major Tom.” Major Tom’s introduction is accompanied by a C-major chord, followed by E-major and F-major. However, in the key of C-major, there is no E-major chord—it should be E-minor, and an E-major chord is not related to the key of C-major in any obvious way (table 1.2). The fact that this unusual chord is introduced along with Major Tom, who is in space, represents his literal transgression of societal norms—in a sense, he is no longer a part of any society, being physically so far removed from Earth, and therefore does not need to adhere to their standards. Similarly, Major Tom’s entrance occurs along with the dropping out of vocal harmonies that were extensively built up during

Ground Control’s vocals, representing the loneliness and literal isolation that comes with space exploration, as well as those same emotions that are associated with living on the fringes of society, just as members of the LGBTQ+ community were forced to do. Later during the bridge, in measure 42, Major Tom sings “Planet Earth is blue, and there’s nothing I can do,” beginning on a B<sup>b</sup>-major chord—the flat seven in C-major. In borrowing the lowered seventh from C-major’s parallel minor, Bowie is completely erasing the key’s leading tone which creates the musical tension that indicates the key that the song is in. Eradicating the leading tone effectively removes the sense of resolution to the tonic, or home, from the chord progression, again projecting an ambiguous sound that represents the parallels between the ambiguity of space exploration and gender expression and sexuality. This use of B<sup>b</sup>-major also occurs during the bridge where the F-major-seventh to E-minor chord progression from the introduction is used again, furthering this sense of harmonic uncertainty (table 1.3).

Table 1.1

Measure number	1	2	3	4
Lyric	—	—	—	—
Chord	FM <sup>7</sup>	e	FM <sup>7</sup>	e
Measure number	5	6	7	8
Lyric	—	—	—	—
Chord	FM <sup>7</sup>	e	FM <sup>7</sup>	e
Measure number	9	10	11	12
Lyric	“Ground control to Major Tom”	—	“Ground control to Major Tom”	—
Chord	C	e	C	e
Measure number	13	14	15	16
Lyric	“Take your protein pills and-	Put your helmet on”	—	—
Chord	a a/G	D <sup>7</sup> /F#	FM <sup>7</sup>	e

Table 1.2

Measure number	31	32	33	34
Lyric	“This is Major Tom to ground control”	“I’m stepping through the-	door/and I’m-	Floating in the most peculiar-
Chord	C	E	F	F C



Table 1.3

Measure number	35	36	37	38
Lyric	Way/and the-	Stars look very different	Today/for-	Here, am I-
Chord	F	f C	F	FM <sup>7</sup>
Measure number	39	40	41	
Lyric	Sitting in a tin can”	“Far above the-	world”	
Chord	e	FM <sup>7</sup>	e	
Measure number	41	43		
Lyric	“Planet Earth is blue, and there’s	Nothing I can do”		
Chord	B <sup>b</sup> a	G F		

David Bowie’s background also gave him the key to appeal to a demographic that, if not for Bowie’s influence, most likely would not have ever considered such “outrageous” ideas. Bowie came from a working class family in Brixton, London, and his parents only married after he was born. Bowie grew up in a rough neighborhood and frequently participated in physical altercations. In his study, *All the Young Dudes: Educational Capital, Masculinity and the Uses of Popular Music*, Andrew Branch (2012) asserts that Bowie’s rejection of stereotypical notions of masculinity allowed the aspiring white male working class of England to do the same, helping them to subvert social class. Bowie’s music also provided a private safe space for LGBTQ+ youth of the time who had nothing and no one else to turn to to validate their existence. Although David Bowie made conflicting claims as to his sexuality throughout his life, the fact is that by publicly exploring his sexual orientation, he helped normalize the common process of questioning one’s sexuality. Similarly, Bowie’s music served as a sanctuary for those who did not have access to “The public-private spaces of gay bars” that “Persistently function as: therapy for people who can’t afford therapy; temples for people who lost their religion, or whose religion lost them; vacations for people who can’t go on vacation; homes for folks without families; sanctuaries against aggression” (Gould, 2016, p. 133).

On January 10th, 2016, the fateful day on which the world lost David Bowie, there was an outpouring of love for him on social media, and countless people shared their experiences with his music helping them learn to accept who they were. Mary Gauthier, a Grammy-nominated musician and writer, tweeted that “David Bowie showed this queer kid from Baton Rouge that gender outlaws are cool. Androgyny=rock&roll, not a reason to kill myself” (Gauthier, 2016). Another Twitter user, Jacob, said that

“As a young little queer boy struggling to fit in #DavidBowie showed me that ‘just fitting in’ wasn’t the only option. He was an inspiration”(Jacob, 2016). No matter what one believes about David Bowie’s actual sexual orientation or what one thinks of his music, it is an indisputable fact that the claims he made, the outfits he wore, and the music he created were instrumental in helping LGBTQ+ youth of the time feel validated and accepted despite the harsh judgments passed on them by society. He thrust himself into the spotlight and subjected himself to harsh criticism of his personal, musical, and lifestyle choices for the sake of preserving freedom of expression. While his initial intention may not have been to become a representative for an entire demographic, his art and his image became the symbol for an entire movement. Over half a century later, even though we still are not perfect and members of the LGBTQ+ community are often subject to hate and violence, we have made immense progress socially and politically, all of which would not have been possible had these issues not been brought into the public eye by brave artists—namely, by the Starman, Ziggy Stardust, David Bowie.

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