

RECORDS

Aladdin Sane
David Bowie
RCA LSP 4852

BY BEN GERSON

Stars and star

A lightning bolt streaks across David's face; on the inside cover the lad is air-brushed into androgyny, a no less imposing figure for it. Though he has been anointed to go out among us and spread the word, we find stuffed into the sleeve, like dirty underwear, a form requesting our name, address, "favorite film and TV stars," etc., plus \$3.50 for membership in the David Bowie Fan Club (materials by return mail unspecified).

Such discrepancies have made David Bowie the most recently controversial of all significant pop artists—all of it owing to the confusion of levels on which he operates. His flamboyant drive for pop-star status has stamped him in many people's eyes a naked opportunist and poseur. But once it is recognized that stardom represents a metaphysical quest for Bowie, one has to grant at least that the question of self-inflation is in his case unconventional.

The twin impulses are to be a star (e.g., Jagger) and to be a star (e.g., Betelgeuse). *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* depicted an impending doomsday, an extraterrestrial visitation and its consequences for rock and society. Although never so billed, *Ziggy* was a rock opera, with plot, characters and musical and dramatic momentum. *Aladdin Sane*, in far less systematic fashion, works over the same themes—issuances from the Bowie schema which date back to *The Man Who Sold the World*. Bowie is cognizant that religion's geography—the heavens—has been usurped, either by science or by actual beings.

If by conventional lights Bowie is a lad insane, then as an Aladdin, a conjurer of supernatural forces, he is quite sane. The titles may change from album to album—from the superman, the homo superior, *Ziggy*, to *Aladdin*—but the vision, and Bowie's rightful place in it, remain constant. The pun of the title, alternately vaunted and dismissive, plays on his own sense of discrepancy. Which way you read it depends upon whether you are viewing the present from the eyes of the past or the future.

Bowie's program is not complete, but it involves the elimination of gender differences, the inevitability of Armageddon, and the conquering of death and time as we know them. Stardom is the means towards attaining a vantage point from which to foresee, and an elevation from which to lead. The awesome powers and transformations civilization associates with heaven and hell will be unleashed on earth.

Aladdin Sane

The title song is this album's "Five Years." Ominously, within parentheses after the title, are the dates "1913-1938-1977." The first two are the years before the outbreak of the first and second World

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Wars, respectively, and we have no reason to think that 1977 represents anything but a year prior to the date of the third. The music is hothouse orientalism, jagged, dissonant and daring, yet also wistful and backward-looking. Phrases like "battle cries and champagne" evoke images of earlier, more romantic wars. The impatient chug of the machine (the electric guitar) gently clashes with the wilder, more extreme flailings of a dying culture (the piano). We have been deposited in the realm of Ives and Stravinsky.

Mike Garson's long piano solo is fabulously imaginative and suggestive, incorporating snatches of *Rhapsody In Blue* and "Tequila." Only a couple of words of the lyrics indicate over what point the song title's question mark must be hovering. The reference to sake, the Japanese drink, in the first verse, and the last verse's "Millions weep a fountain/just in case of sunrise" suggest the land of the rising sun as a potentially significant future locale. While writing this album, Bowie decided to tour Japan (where he has recently been performing), and *Ziggy* was described on the last album as "like some cat from Japan." The relationship of *Aladdin's* visitations to the outbreak of war is not clear. Is it his appearance, or our failure to embrace him, which plunges us into strife?

Although a good portion of the songs on *Aladdin Sane* are hard rock & roll, a closer inspection reveals them to be advertisements for their own obsolescence—vignettes in which the baton is being passed on to a newer sensibility. "Watch That Man," the album's opening number, is inimitable Stones, *Exile* vintage. Mick Ronson plays Chuck Berry licks via Keith Richard, Garson plays at being Nicky Hopkins, Bowie slurs his lines, and the female backup singers and horns make the appropriate noises. Like *Ziggy*, one of the subjects of *Aladdin Sane* is rock & roll (and its lynchpin, sex), only here it is extended to include its ultimate exponents, the Stones.

Taking up the warning he gave in "Changes"—"Look out you rock & rollers/Pretty soon you're gonna get a little older"

—David presents "an old-fashioned band of married men/Looking up to me for encouragement." To emphasize the archaism of these fellows, there are references to Benny Goodman and "Tiger Rag." Jagger himself has become so dainty "that he could eat you with a fork and spoon."

"Let's Spend the Night Together" continues the Stones preoccupation. Here, one of the most ostensibly heterosexual calls in rock is made into a bi-anthem: The cover version is a means to an ultimate revisionism. The rendition here



is campy, butch, brittle and unsatisfying. Bowie is asking us to re-perceive "Let's Spend the Night Together" as a gay song, possibly from its inception. Sexual ambiguity in rock has existed long before any audience was attuned to it. However, though Bowie's point is well taken, his methods are not.

"Drive-In Saturday" was conceived during Bowie's passage through the Arizona desert. It is a fantasy in which the populace, after some terrible holocaust, has forgotten how to make love. To learn again they take courses at the local drive-in, where they view films in which "like once before . . . people stared in Jagger's eyes and scored."

"Panic In Detroit" places us right in the middle of a battered urban scape. Ronson deals out a compelling Bo Diddley beat which quickly leads into a helter-skelter descending scale. The song is a paranoid descendant of the Motor City's earlier masterpiece, Martha and the Van-

dellas' "Nowhere To Run." The hero is "the only survivor of the National People's Gang," the revolutionary star (shades of Sinclair), Che as wall poster. By the end of the song, all that is left to claim his revolutionary immortality is a suicide note, an "autograph" poignantly inscribed "Let me collect dust."

Rock and revolutionary stardom are not the only varieties which are doomed. In his work Bowie is often contemptuous of actors, yet he is, above all, an actor. His intent on "Cracked Actor," a portrait of an aging screen idol, vicious, conceited, mercenary, the object of the ministrations of a male gigolo, is to strip the subject of his validity, as he has done with the rocker, as a step towards a re-definition of these roles and his own inhabiting of them. The homosexuality of "Cracked Actor" is not, as elsewhere, ground-breaking and affirmative, but rather decadent and sick. "The Prettiest Star," the album's other slice of cinematic life, again asserts the connection between secular and celestial stardom: "You and I will rise up all the way/All because of what you are/The Prettiest Star." But the song itself is too self-consciously vaudeville.

"Time" is a bit of Brecht/Weill, a bit of Brel. All the world's not a stage, but a dressing room, in which Time holds sway, exacts payment. Once we're on, as in all theaters, time is suspended and will no longer "In quaaludes and red wine" be "Demanding Billy Dolls"—a reference to the death of New York Dolls drummer Billy Murcia in London last summer.

The appeal to an afterlife, or its equivalent, which is implied in this song, using the theater as its metaphor, is further clarified in "Lady Grinning Soul." The song is beautifully arranged; Ronson's guitar, both six-string and twelve, elsewhere so muscular, is here, except for some faulty intonation on the acoustic solo, very poetic. Bowie, a ballad singer at heart, which lends his rock singing its special edge, gives "Lady Grinning Soul" the album's most expansive and sincere vocal.

One step further

The seeming contradictions

intrinsic to this album and the body of the last four albums are exasperating, yet the outlines are sufficiently legible to establish the records from *The Man Who Sold the World* to *Aladdin* as reworkings of the same obsessions—only the word obsession smacks too much of psychological enslavement. Partly, the difficulty derives from the very private language Bowie employs; partly, I suspect, it is the function of a very canny withholding of information. Each album seems to advance the myth, but perhaps it is only a matter of finding new metaphors for the same message, packing more and more reality (in *Aladdin's* case, the America Bowie discovered on tour) into his scheme, universalizing it.

Aladdin is less manic than *The Man Who Sold the World*, and less intimate than *Hunky Dory*, with none of its attacks of self-doubt. *Ziggy*, in turn, was less autobiographically revealing, more threatening than its predecessors, but still compact. Like David's Radio City Music Hall show, *Aladdin* is grander, more produced: David is more than ever more mastermind than participant. *Aladdin's* very eclecticism makes it even less exposed, conceptually, than *Ziggy*. Three of the tracks, "Pretty As a Star," "Let's Spend the Night Together," and the related "The Jean Genie," are inferior; they lack the obdurate strength of the remaining songs, not to mention the perfection of *Hunky Dory* and *Ziggy*. The calmness of the former, the inexorability of the latter (which manages to subsume the question of each individual song's merit) are not *Aladdin Sane's*.

You needn't buy the mumbo-jumbo to accept Bowie's provocative melodies, audacious lyrics, masterful arrangements (with Mick Ronson) and production (with Ken Scott). As a strictly musical figure Bowie is of major importance. His remoteness, his stubbornness, do not describe a man at the mercy of the media or his audience, ready to alter his course at their behest, but one who wills them to do his bidding—the arrogance of the true believer. David has organized his career according to a schedule to which he steadfastly adheres. With Time waiting in the wings, an apocalypse near at hand, he lacks the freedom to tamper with it.

Certainly there is a general sense of oncoming catastrophe afoot in the land; many of his other concerns enjoy equal currency. But Bowie, unique among the pop musicians of today, sees them as the province of popular music (and popular music, by extension, as a world-shaking force). He is attempting to seize hold of these questions with the energy and commitment the Beatles and Dylan evinced towards their areas of concern in the Sixties. With the benefit of hindsight, he seeks the kind of power the Beatles and Dylan had to discover they could have. However, it is not his goal just to return music to its stature as more than music. With the benefit of hindsight, it is to take it one step further.