THE MANY FACES OF DAVID BOWIE

But many of the black clad and cafetinated journalists, at the first major media conference for Bowie’s new Reality Tour, were bemused by the persona he had adopted for them. When serious questions besetting a serious artist he took on irrelevant and surreal tangents carried away with being a burly rock survivor. After a few attempts one journalist, assuming from Bowie’s performance that he was talking to a flybitten and overly excited pop star who couldn’t possibly be serious, asked a typical pop star question - “What’s your favourite colour?” Bowie called him an idiot and moved on, not realizing that the journalist was, by now, simply taking the piss. Perhaps Bowie had spent too much time with Mick Jagger, another so-called elegant defender who tends to adopt personas, for the voice that those caught Kenny O’Brian’s show on ABC TV Bowie was playing a completely different role taking care of and uneventfully and even admitting to his own shyness. His performance on Rave was also exceptional.

When asked at the media conference if he tried to launch himself these days with the image and sound he had in the seventeens would Cleer Channel, the multinational conglomerate who run theatre, sports events and radio stations around the world, play his songs, Bowie’s upbeat persona changed. “They don’t play me, anyway,” he truly replied. “They might be promoting my tour but they don’t play me on the radio.” So why have them sponsor your tour? “They’re not sponsoring it; they’re running it. It costs a lot to mount a tour and this is the way it’s done these days. They’re doing a very successful tour for me but as far as radio goes, they’re not helping anything.” Then, reverting to his designated role, Bowie continued with a laugh, “But I’ve come to expect that.”

Bowie, born David Robert Jones in 1947, began his chameleon-like career by playing saxophone professionally then forming his first band, Davy Jones and the Lower Third, in 1963. After signing to Pye in 1966 he changed his name to avoid confusion with the lead singer of the Monkees. Bowie also worked with Lindsay Kemp’s mime troupe around this period, a turn which was to have long lasting effects on his theatricality. After a few minor hits, Space Oddity tapped into the zeitgeist in 1969 and he was away. He put together a band that included Mick Ronson and released the critically acclaimed Hunky Dory album then followed this with The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust & the Spiders From Mars; his first big break. When he adopted the Ziggy character, a rock star with all the trappings, Bowie led all to believe that he was indeed the star he was portraying. His persona, and Mick Ronson’s work on songs like Rebel Rebel, Joan Baez and Aztec camera, set the sound and the image for the coming punk explosion. From that point he was rarely out of the charts. He was also in demand as a producer working with Lou Reed on the ‘Transformer’ album which gave us songs like Walk on the Wild Side. He also eventually oversaw Iggy Pop’s career renaissance. After a number of successful albums, including what some have called his masterpiece, Station to Station, Bowie moved to Berlin and adopted the persona of the Thin White Duke. In this guise he produced a trilogy of groundbreaking works. These included Low, Heroes and Lodger. When the decade turned Ashes to Ashes went to number one and was cut from his next release Scary Monsters (And Super Creeps) in 1980. This was often seen as his last great album until Let’s Dance produced by Nile Rodgers was released in 1983. He then put together a band with former players from Iggy Pop’s bands which he called Tin Machine. From this point Bowie seemed to lose his chameleon-like ability to stay musically one jump ahead of the ever changing pack.

Over the last forty years Bowie has used a variety of approaches to his songwriting. The most famous example being his technique he employed during his Thin White Duke phase where he took a set of lyrics, cut them up, shuffled them in the air and then rearranged them in the order they fell in. Given that a lot of the musical high points of Bowie’s career have been with Tony Visconti at the helm as producer, he was working with him again on these new albums, it was interesting to speculate on what Visconti contributed to the songwriting.

“I’ve collaborated with Tony in the past and he’s contributed quite a lot but nothing to the actual songwriting,” Bowie acknowledged. “This time we tried to get as many kick-arse songs as we could and this lot are a little more positive with some good moods and some bad moods. He’s a great producer.”

When asked who he’d like to produce himself at the moment Bowie quickly responded, “James Angel from California. He’s an indie but no major company will pick him up, I’d like to do Iggy Pop Pop. He’s always fun. Also Mercury Rev. I’ve been listening to them a lot lately. Candidly, there’s another one.”

Then he was asked about his constant flirtation with films. What would his next role be? He smiled again, this time understanding the implications of the question. “My favourite film of all of them is Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence.” He said, “and I’d have to say it was my favourite role. I love to do cameos which I do mostly but I usually pick a role by whose directing it. When a director like Barnes gets up and says ‘David can you do this five minute walk on? I go ‘sure’ because it’s fun. I’d love to be a movie star but you’ve got to do and work at it and I don’t have the commitment for that, I don’t take it seriously enough. In the end it’s not my profession. Music is.”

Johnnie Clott

They don’t play me on the radio