

'Much more than a lead guitarist'

Angie Bowie talks to **Duncan Seaman** about her part in David Bowie's early career and her friendship with Mick Ronson, ahead of a new documentary

It was a simple gesture but one which has been etched in rock folklore ever since David Bowie wrapped a comradely arm around the shoulder of guitarist Mick Ronson while they were performing "Starman" on *Top of the Pops* in July 1972.

For some it was the start of a social revolution – happening just weeks after Bowie announced to *Melody Maker* "I'm gay and always have been" – but for Angie Bowie, the Cypriot-American who was married to the singer between 1970 and 1980, the accompanying fuss still seems absurd.

"I'd never heard such a load of bollocks," she says forcefully as we discuss *Beside Bowie*, a new

documentary for Sky Arts that shines a light on the life of the Hull-born guitar slinger Ronson and his contribution to Spiders From Mars, the band indelibly linked to a string of classic Bowie albums from the early 1970s.

"You don't put your arm around the shoulders of a musician you're playing with when you're doing a chorus or you're getting him to start playing a solo [with any revolutionary intent]. I've been an entertainer and a performer myself, I've done it a thousand times.

"I suppose it's not looked at that much because I'm a girl and people in my band were boys but I suppose if I'd had a girl drummer and done it that would have been

a moment of high excitement. It's rubbish... Well, who gives a shit?"

Angie, now 67, recalls her first meeting with Ronson well. It was February 1970 and David Bowie was then looking for a new lead guitarist to join his band, who were at that point called The Hype. Ronson, then 23 years old, was suggested by the drummer John Cambridge, who had known him from their

time in the East Yorkshire music scene. "He was as charming as he could be. We went up to Hull to meet him and he was fabulous, very friendly, very nice and it was quite apparent very quickly how competent he was and what a skilled musician he was."



Two days later Ronson made his debut at Bowie's side during an *In Concert* broadcast on BBC Radio 1. Angie noticed the pair got on immediately as Ronson moved into Haddon Hall, the sprawling Victorian villa in Beckenham where they were all then living.

"David was a very easy-to-get-along-with person for other musicians. He was very outgoing and explained exactly what he wanted. Ronno was very good and very bright so I don't think there were any communication problems whatsoever."

Angie Bowie was appearing on television in January last year, as a contestant in the *Celebrity Big Brother* house, when the news broke of David Bowie's death at the age of 69. The couple had been divorced since 1980. "It was

a shock, but not that much of a shock," she says. "You expect people to die, don't you? You don't expect them to die that soon."

Angie has been credited with encouraging Bowie and his band - who soon included two more Yorkshiremen, Trevor Bolder and Mick "Woody" Woodmansey - to dress more flamboyantly.

"Do you mean was I sergeant in command?" she says, laughing at the idea. "No, I told them if they even thought about going out like a

bunch of American rock'n'rollers in dirty jeans and T-shirts they could forget about it because we'd be going nowhere."

Still, it's been suggested there was some resistance from the working class Ronson, Bolder and Woodmansey. "They didn't wear anything right away, it evolved," Angie says. "We started with finding Freddie Burretti after we had done the first show in costume, which, when I saw the photographs, I thought: 'Nah, that's too amateurish, we did our best but we need more.'"

She moved Burretti into Haddon Hall and set him off sewing.

"I produced that part of the thing and then

as the first costumes came out, the ones that looked like jumpsuits, part of the early Ziggy stuff in all different colours and different fabrics, that was not an issue for the guys but they still looked washed-out, it wasn't enough so I said to

them: 'Look, we're going to have to polish this up a bit, you're going to have to realise you're entertainers now, you're not just musicians'. You've got to wear make-up and you've got to get your hair looking great. You've got to make a few changes so you look more dynamic on stage so that way it's easier for kids to spot you and pull out the person, whoever it is, on stage that appeals to them most'.

In the documentary, Angie describes Ronson as "much more than a lead guitarist". Certainly his contribution as an arranger was a key factor in the success of records such as *Hunky Dory*, *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars* and *Aladdin Sane*, as well as Lou Reed's *Transformer* which he co-produced with Bowie at Trident Studios in London in 1972.

Angie disputes the idea that Ronson's work was overlooked, at least by those in the know. "Media or the critics might have overlooked him. The audiences loved him," she says.

Amid all the hysteria surrounding Ziggy Stardust, Ronson was to meet his future wife when Angie brought in Suzi Fussey to style Bowie's famous

red feather-cut hairdo. The cut itself, Angie says, was modelled on an image in *Vogue* magazine. "We just changed the colour and made it look more like a puffball, so it looked like a dandelion."

It was while the Ziggy tour was blazing across the US and Japan in 1972 that some cracks started to appear in the band when Woodmansey and Bolder

discovered the American piano player Mike Garson was being paid considerably more than their £50 a week and challenged Bowie's manager Tony Defries. The following year, on stage at the Hammersmith Odeon, Bowie stunned fans by announcing the end of the band.

"It did come like a bolt from the blue," Angie says. "The band

and I were gobsmacked. I got very angry with David and Tony Defries subsequently because they were a pair of treacherous idiots leading us along."

Ronson had three solo albums, a long-running partnership with Ian Hunter of Mott the Hoople and a spell in Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue - but, as the documentary makes clear, he rarely seemed to get his financial due and as he battled liver cancer in 1992 it was to be production work on Morrissey's album *Your Arsenal* that helped provide much-needed funds. He died on 29 April 1993 aged 43, leaving behind his wife, Suzi, daughter Lisa and two sons, Nicholas and Joakim.

Angie feels Ronson could perhaps have gone on to be a bigger star. "[His career] needed someone like me to organise it."

She is adamant she feels little nostalgia for the early 1970s. "It was a fabulously enjoyable time... But it was a different world and a different time. There were a lot of misogynist pigs in the music business and I don't look back on that with any affection."

'Beside Bowie: The Mick Ronson Story' is on Sky Arts on Saturday

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Angie Bowie at the final of 'Celebrity Big Brother'

JEFF SPICER/GETTY





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Mick Ronson (right) performs with David Bowie at The Marquee Club in London, 1973; Bowie with Angie, his first wife (below) in 1973 EXPRESS; GETTY

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