

‘I didn’t care about his lovers as long as they realised I was queen’

David Bowie’s first wife, Angie, tells **Will Hodgkinson** about the couple’s bisexuality, life after Bowie’s death and her estrangement from their son

Not long into our interview, Angie Bowie offers a frankly surprising perspective on how she helped to come up with David Bowie’s sexually confrontational image for the Ziggy Stardust era. She didn’t want to get pregnant.

“My father didn’t want me to do anything to upset his apple cart in Cyprus,” says Angie Bowie, who grew up on the island where her American father, a mining engineer, was stationed. “But hormones will run rampant, so what does that leave you with? The other 50 per cent of the population. I had an affair with a girl at college in Connecticut and had to leave because if I stayed there I would be locked up, as she was, for four years in a psychiatric institute in Yale for being gay.

“So I had a grudge. I sat down with David the first night I met him and we agreed we were bisexual. Later, when it came to understanding how we could reach the marketplace, I wondered if there was a niche suited to David. My conclusion was that conversation about bisexuality.”

Davie Bowie’s first wife is ensconced in a suitably grand suite at the May

Fair Hotel in central London, and it doesn’t take long to see how she would have been instrumental in propelling Bowie to fame. She has a voice that can surely be heard back in her home in Georgia. Now 67, she exudes a more feminine version of the brittle, peroxide-blond glamour with which she first made an impact in the early 1970s. And she can switch from being utterly charming to quite terrifying. She’s not actually here to talk about her slight, feminine former husband, but the muscular hunk who once played guitar stage left of him.

Mick Ronson was working as a gardener in Hull when in 1970 he received an invitation to form a band with Bowie. He went on to play on and also to arrange and co-write many of the songs on Bowie’s golden-era albums in the early 1970s: *The Man Who Sold the World*, *Hunky Dory*, *Ziggy Stardust*, *Aladdin Sane*. As Bowie states in an interview included in a new documentary on Ronson, *Beside Bowie: The Mick Ronson Story*: “I thought we were every bit as good as Mick Jagger and Keith Richards. Ziggy and Mick [Ronson] were the personification of that rock’n’roll dualism.”

“Mick was a northerner first and foremost,” says Jon Brewer, a former



manager of Bowie and the director of the documentary. “He was as down-to-earth as he was ambitious and hardworking. Bowie knew the two of them had a connection. He also knew Mick was the best guitarist he ever worked with.”

Ronson does make for a fascinating chapter in the Bowie story. After Angie and David visited the guitarist at his mother Minnie’s house in Hull and Angie promised Minnie she would iron her son’s shirts and stop him from falling prey to any rock’n’roll ailments, Ronson moved down to live with the couple at Haddon Hall. It was a huge Victorian house in suburban Beckenham where Bowie, written off as a one-hit wonder after *Space Oddity* in 1969, was plotting ways of making another impact.

“I got Haddon Hall from two professors with 18 cats,” Angie booms. “The house was full of plants, so you can imagine what the cats did. They thought they were outside. But by the time I bleached it down it felt like ours. The boys in the band lived in the mezzanine, Tony Visconti [Bowie’s producer] built a rehearsal room in the basement and our nanny [Marion Skene, who was bequeathed \$1 million in Bowie’s will] lived in the basement

flat. It was a compound of creativity and Mick was so accommodating. I said to David: ‘He’s so striking, he’s so strong, he’s a Yorkshire surfer!’ I was there for David first and foremost, but I could see what Rono had to offer.”

In the early years Angie, Bowie and Ronson lived in a glorious bubble of outré excitement. Struggling to get out of a record contract as Bowie switched managers, they gave the songs *The Man Who Sold the World* to Lulu and *All the Young Dudes* to Mott the Hoople to keep the Bowie name out there. They hung out at the Sombrero, a gay club on Kensington High Street where Ronson struggled to work out not only who was gay or straight, but who was male or female. And they made Lou Reed a star by producing, arranging and, according to Brewer, writing much of his 1972 breakthrough

album, *Transformer*.

“Lou arrived at Heathrow with a boy and girl who were brother and sister and said, ‘Have you met my boyfriend and girlfriend?’” says Angie. “In the studio it was a love fest. Rono was at the console, David was beside him, and Rono said to Lou, ‘When it comes to recording, you might want to have your guitar in tune.’ He impressed the hell out of Lou.”

Brewer adds: “In the industry everyone knew Mick Ronson did *Perfect Day* and *Walk on the Wild Side*. It was only when I saw the album cover that I discovered he wasn’t credited.”

How about their lifestyle? Angie has admitted the nanny did the lion’s share of looking after her and Bowie’s son, Zowie (now known as Duncan Jones and a successful film director). Meanwhile, Bowie’s promiscuity — for a man who was supposed to be gay, he slept with an awful lot of women — would surely have posed a challenge to a more conventional wife.

“I really didn’t care about anyone getting in my face with David as long as they realised I was the queen,” she says. “I thought, ‘Sure, flirt, do your thing. But guess what? I’m the queen bee, baby!’”

Not that the leading figures of London’s clandestine gay scene were particularly happy about Bowie’s outrageousness. “It brought us the total disdain of jackasses and hypocrites,” she hollers. “I realised we were having an effect when the closeted old queens started raging about us and saying we were so terrible. I thought, ‘We’ve got ’em where it hurts!’ They didn’t want anyone to know.”

Problems really began when Tony DeFries, Bowie’s manager, hired the cast of Andy Warhol’s musical *Pork* to run his office in New York. “The Warhol people were fabulous as entertainers, but I had an issue with how much sweat we were paying out of David’s body. I never forgave Tony for that, and wrote an evil poem about him called *Kinky Big Nose*.”

She recites it: “He found himself a little bird that could sing, sing, sing.



He flogged that bird until it died, fell on its broken wing.”

What did she think of Warhol?
 “I thought Andy Warhol was a total moron. I still do. You can take someone who paints Campbell’s soup tins and tell me for ever that it was a populist moment and I will look at you with a glazed expression. David had been on the road with [the mime artist] Lindsay Kemp, and his mind juxtaposed Warhol and Lindsay. The difference is that Lindsay has everything and Warhol had nothing. Including no sexual attraction, for anyone on the planet, as far as I can tell.”

Angie claims she had no idea that Bowie and DeFries had cooked up a plan to kill off Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars, and only found out when everyone else did: when Bowie announced it on stage at the Hammersmith Odeon on July 3, 1973. Woody Woodmansey, the drummer,

subsequently learnt that he had been booted out for good on his wedding day.

“Had I known, it would never have happened,” Angie says. “I didn’t speak to David for a week. It still incenses me. DeFries decided to clean the house because the boys had the audacity to ask for a raise.”

They were on £30 a week each. “DeFries ended up losing \$22 million because he gave it to someone for a tax shelter and they just kept on running. Oh well. That’s what happens when you don’t share the wealth.”

Ronson, whose last album with Bowie was *Pin Ups*, the covers collection of 1973, received neither the wealth nor the credit. His solo career never really took off, and although he got by as a session and

touring guitarist for Bob Dylan, Ian Hunter and Morrissey, a rapprochement with Bowie came too late, at a tribute concert for Freddie Mercury in 1992. A year later Ronson died of cancer. He was 46.

Did he and Angie keep in touch? “No, because he started going out with Suzi [Fussey, Bowie’s former hairdresser] and he didn’t need two women in his life. Besides, David got mad at me when I offered to help Rono.”

Bowie was certainly entranced by Angie — he wrote *The Prettiest Star* and *Golden Years* about her — but the marriage ended in 1980, with custody of nine-year-old Zowie going to David. Angie claims she was blackballed from the

entertainment industry after the divorce, and was so depressed that she came close to suicide. When I ask if things have improved for her since Bowie’s death last year, she becomes atypically pensive.

“Actually, they have,” she says, reflectively (she found out about his death when she was in the *Celebrity Big Brother* house and initially opted to remain inside, but later left). “It is a very interesting question and kind of frightening. I don’t get it. Perhaps it is because I am the last one standing.”

She has been in a relationship with Michael Gasset, an electrical engineer nearly 20 years her junior, since the 1990s and she has a daughter, Stacia, with the punk musician Drew Blood.

I ask if she has been in touch with Bowie’s widow, Iman, or even her son Duncan, who had a son of his own last year. She and Duncan have long been estranged. My question does not go down well.

“Iman?” She rolls the name around, incredulously, eyes afire. “My son? No, why should I be? I’m not interested. It stopped when my father changed his will to not include an educational trust fund for Zowie



because David divorced me. When my father did that I followed precedent. It's over. Nothing. Nothing to do with me."

In 2009 Angie claimed that Bowie had poisoned their son against her. "They got upset with me, saying, 'She's just a money-grabbing bitch... She never wished him happy birthday...' I thought it was more respectful to allow his family to celebrate his birthday, as opposed to an ex-wife, but that's just me."

Suddenly she is all smiles again, telling me how pleased she is that Ronson will, thanks to Brewer's film, finally get his due. And then, with a television appearance to get to, she's gone.

The last word is left to Brewer. "Mick and David never really fell out," he says. "It was more that David got a really bad coke habit, which turned him upside down. He always wanted to work with Mick again, but he needed someone as strong as Angie to make it happen and she was no longer in his life. It was unfinished business. This documentary finishes that business."

Beside Bowie: The Mick Ronson Story is on Sky Arts, May 27, at 9pm



“
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After the final Spiders from Mars concert in 1973, the Bowies threw a party at the Café Royal in Piccadilly, London. Back row, from left: Edgar Broughton, Bianca Jagger, David Bowie, Angie Bowie and Tim Buckley. Front: Ringo Starr, Celia Hammond, Jeff Beck, Lulu, Mick Ronson and Maureen Starkey



Above left: David Bowie and his wife Iman. Right: Andy Warhol

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Duncan Jones



Star men: David Bowie and Mick Ronson in 1972

