

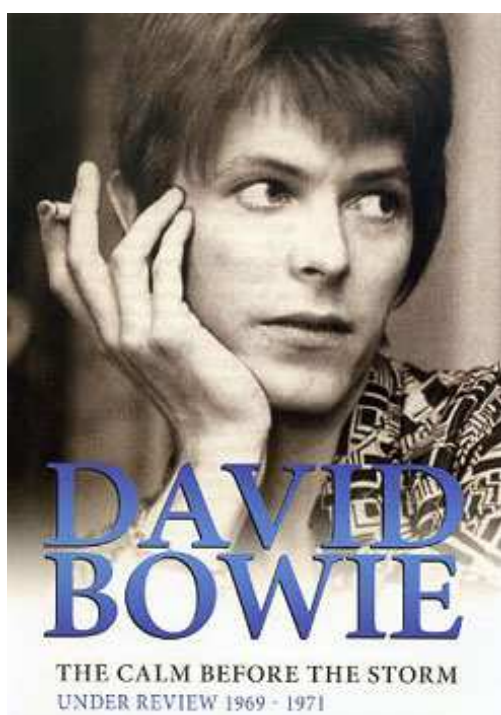
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## DVD Review: David Bowie – The Calm Before The Storm: Under Review 1969-1971



It's a shopworn cliché to claim that **David Bowie** is and has always been a chameleon. Yes, his music and onstage/public person have gone through a series of calculated ch-ch-changes (there; got *that* out of the way quickly), but his work has proceeded in an arguably very linear fashion. Another in the long series of “under review” type DVDs, *David Bowie: The Calm Before the Storm* applies a critical perspective to Bowie's first four albums.

Drawing upon the now familiar (or familiar to anyone who's watched as many Chrome Dream productions as I have) battery of music journos, former collaborators and occasional scenesters, *The Calm Before the Storm* moves quickly through assessments of Bowie's early recorded output. After dispensing with his **David Jones and the Lower Third** work in a cursory fashion (to be fair, it doesn't deserve more), the film examines his self-titled debut, arguing that it was influenced by equal parts **Anthony Newley** and **Syd Barrett**. Your mileage may vary, but I hear a lot of Newley and not much Syd in numbers like “Love You Till Tuesday.”

After that record went nowhere, Bowie worked harder on his songwriting, hooked up with producer **Tony Visconti** and created another self-titled album, this one much more in a **Donovan** vein. But when events conspired to help make “Space Oddity” (a track that Visconti passed on) a hit, that album – re-released as *Space Oddity* –

helped launch him into the commercial stratosphere.

But after the second LP's initial release, it was time for another change. *The Man Who Sold the World* is described in this critical review DVD as "dark," "drug-addled" and in other arguably negative terms, but it's more of a piece with what would come later than anything else Bowie did on his other early work. The fourth album, *Hunky Dory*, is widely (and on this DVD) hailed as the finest release of Bowie's early career, but I've never been all that fond of it: it's too precious by half, far too dated (unlike "The Man Who Sold the World," which sounded as fresh when **Nirvana** covered it as the day it was written), and a bit too English Music Hall for my tastes. Plus, **Mick Ronson** got more guitar parts on *The Man Who Sold the World* than on *Hunky Dory*; the former rocks while the latter rarely does so.

*The Calm Before the Storm* is relatively brief at just over an hour. The bonus material – nothing astounding – adds a few more minutes. The talking heads chosen for this project do know their subject, though. **Kris Needs** is particularly insightful, as is (via archival footage) the late **John Peel**. A number of Bowie's early musical collaborators (he might call them sidemen) add a good deal of interesting information; they argue convincingly that Bowie's not so enigmatic as he'd have you believe. And Australian-born, UK-based music journalist **Andrew Mueller** does a first-rate job of creeping this viewer out by looking, sounding and acting uncannily like the late and sorely missed **Paul Hester** (**Split Enz**, **Crowded House**).

Sometimes the visuals don't make a helluva lot of contextual sense; this is an unfortunate hallmark of the otherwise solid Chrome Dreams productions. They want to show you something interesting while the audio of a relevant song plays, so they sometimes slap on whatever's at hand. In the case of "The Man Who Sold the World," it's a clip from **Carol Reed**'s cold-war noirish 1949 thriller *The Third Man*, a scene with **Joseph Cotten** and **Orson Welles**. What that has to do with a Bowie song from the dawn of the 1970s will remain a mystery.

*The Calm Before the Storm* feels like – and almost assuredly is – the first in a series of critical overviews of Bowie's work. It doesn't cover the most interesting phase of the man's recording career, but it's a necessary prologue to what would follow.

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