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**David Bowie – The Berlin Years: 1976 - 1979** (Under Review/Music Video Distributors DVD)

Picture: C+ Sound: C+ Extras: C  
Main Program: B+

David Bowie is such an important artist that news of a documentary about what is possibly his most artistically exceptional period drew such demand by our fellow critics that we decided to try a first here by having four writers cover the same title to get different perspectives. We have struck out overlap, so each successive review is shorter than the first.

When everyone thought Bowie would be the next Beatles, but Elton John (until his press fallout over his sexuality) was the next phenomenon, it did not stop Bowie from being Bowie. At the time he did the albums in question, a large number of people were expecting him to overtake everyone, but his work was bashed instead and the period too easily dismissed. Now, they know better.

First up, analysis by Kristofer Collins [desolationrowcds@hotmail.com](mailto:desolationrowcds@hotmail.com):

This ain't Rock'n'roll... Bowie's right, you know. His music ain't Rock'n'roll. No sir, not at all. Perhaps it's just my nature as a nitpicker, or my very annoying need to be contrarian, but every time someone tells me Bowie is their fave rocker the hair on the back of my neck stands up and my hackles get all hackled. Bowie's music is not Rock'n'roll.

Don't get me wrong, I love the guy's tunes, at least the music he released up to and including **Scary Monsters** and **Super Creeps**, everything after that is pretty much a wash, but hey, if you had a run of great records like Bowie's you're allowed to spend the next three decades turning out pabulum. It's alright. After all, guy made **Aladdin Sane**, **Hunky Dory**, and **Low**. Make those albums and I can forgive you Tin Machine.

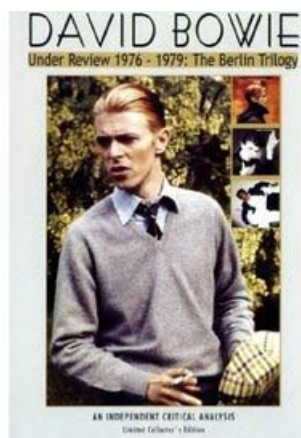
But back to the point - David Bowie has never made a Rock'n'roll record. Sure, he's made records that approximate Rock, like **Ziggy Stardust** and **Pin-Ups**, but these records are about as close to true Rock as Broadway's **Rent**. I'm not disparaging those albums, well maybe **Rent**, (just to be clear, Bowie's work is sooooo much better than **Rent**, it's simply the intent that is similar) but those are records about the experience of Rock, they're about how an audience receives Rock, and as such they make use of Rock'n'roll clichés such as Rocker as new Messiah (Ziggy) and Rock as nostalgia (**Pin-Ups**). What sells those records as a true Rock experience more than anything Bowie does is Mick Ronson's dirty, sweet garage-y guitar. Everything else screams theatre, everything else is intellectual and meta.

And the last thing Rock'n'roll can be considered is intellectual.

In this latest installment of Under Review to hit our fair shores, one of our heroes, the critic who looks like he just came from a marathon session down the pub watching the Tour de France, says it outright, "I never bought the characters." And why should he or anyone else really, buy into the whole Derrida pantomime that Bowie was prone to in those days. Luckily, Bowie made **The Man Who Fell to Earth** (reviewed on DVD elsewhere on this site) prior to recording the Berlin trilogy and he seemed to have gotten all of that cracked actor nonsense out of his system so when he got into the studio with Eno and Visconti, the music he made was substantially different, more abstract and more personal all at the same time.

He wasn't playing a character on those records, not copping some pose. Bowie just got down to the business of busting out tunes that turned him on. It was the first time in his career that he made music that wasn't reflecting some trend with proven sales (the Philly Soul of Young Americans, the Gene Vincent meets T.Rex of Ziggy, the folk-pop of Hunky Dory, the heavy Prog of The Man Who Sold the World). There's a lot to be said about the music of Eno, Kraftwerk, Can, and Harmonia, all sources for the sound on the Berlin records, but you cannot seriously make the argument that suburban American kids with too much discretionary cash loved layin' down the bucks for that stuff.

Making those records was a big risk for Bowie, bigger than trawling for transvestites with Lou Reed, bigger even than shaking Iggy Pop's hand, ugh the places Iggy's hand has been, but it



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was a gamble that paid off. The music, particularly of **Low** and **Heroes**, is routinely considered visionary. Philip Glass turned those tunes into a symphony and the book series 33 1/3 chose Low as the Bowie album worthy of an entire book. And now this DVD.

Wayne Wise [www.wayne-wise.com](http://www.wayne-wise.com)

Sometime in the early 80's I bought my first car. It was a used 1977 Ford Granada, a primer gray boat that I drove for years until it fell apart out from under me. It had an 8-track player factory installed in the dash. Now, by then I wasn't really an 8-track fan and quickly installed a cassette deck. What was cool about this particular 8-track player was the tape that the previous owner had left behind.

Heroes was the first full length David Bowie album I ever heard. I wasn't a complete stranger to Bowie. I had owned the singles of *Rebel, Rebel* and *Fame*. But I was just young enough to have missed the height of his Glam era success and somehow never managed to pick up an album or to have any friends who did. By the time of the Granada Bowie was in his **Let's Dance** phase, and while I kind of liked the single I wasn't really drawn to explore his work any further. But a free 8-track is a free 8-track, so I listened.

It blew me away. I certainly didn't expect and wasn't prepared for the soundscape Heroes offered. It came at a good time for me. I was growing very tired of what I was hearing on the radio and was desperately looking for something new (new to me anyway, *Heroes* was several years old by the time I heard it). Bowie's experimentation fit the bill nicely.

At the time I had no idea what was going on in Bowie's life when **Heroes** was made, or that it was the middle album of a trilogy recorded in Berlin (**Low** and **Lodger** were the other two). Over the years, as I became more acquainted with Bowie and his body of work the pieces began to come together.

**David Bowie Under Review 1976 1979: The Berlin Trilogy** tells the whole story. After the insane success of the Ziggy Stardust era the Golden Age of Glam was fading (KISS notwithstanding). Bowie felt a need to retire from the intensity of the public eye as well as to explore other musical directions. He went to Berlin to live and work. While there he co-wrote and produced two albums with Iggy Pop (going as far as being a member of Iggy's touring band in an effort to step into the background). He also began working with Brian Eno. Eno had worked with the Glam/Lounge band Roxy Music and then moved on to solo work. The creative dynamic between Bowie and Eno proved to be the creative impetus for the Berlin trilogy of albums.

The DVD covers the specifics far better than I can here. It is well written and extensive, with a lot of archival footage. It provides historical context for the music as well as giving insight into the specific recordings and the process by which they were created. An essential for Bowie fans.

Jarrod DeArmitt:


This installment of the Under Review series takes as its subject what many critics along with this writer consider to be one of Bowie's most creative and overlooked periods, the so called "Berlin Trilogy." This trilogy consists of three albums, **Heroes**, **Low**, and **Lodger**, Bowie released at a time when he seen all his early characters to their logical conclusion, was visibly wracked by drug abuse, and had the whole world wondering what he could possibly do next.

What Bowie did do next still seems shocking and fresh almost thirty years on. This is not to say that these albums were the first to favor electronics over organic instruments, or that these albums are even the best examples of earlier electronic music. However, there is something that these albums, **Low** and **Heroes** in particular, have that really sets them apart and makes them stand out not only in the Bowie catalog but also within the experimental/electronic genres. Although the synths used sound primitive and sometimes dated, there is still something that makes these albums seem as though they had landed on earth no longer ago than yesterday. The second side of **Low** still baffles and intrigues me after years of listenings. And then, aside from the more dissonant/symphonic material, Bowie released songs like *Sound and Vision* and *Heroes* which stand there own as some of the best pop songs ever written.

Nicholas Sheffo:

Bowie had been influenced by many things and one of them was the work of Stanley Kubrick, which is obvious as early as *Space Oddity*, with its **2001: A Space Odyssey** influence. **Dr.**

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**Strangelove & A Clockwork Orange** also figured prominently, giving Bowie five years from **Clockwork** to the release of **The Man Who Fell To Earth** to explore the themes musically and visually on stage without actually having to himself enter the film realm. When he did with the great director Nicolas Roeg in peak form, he could no longer claim, feign or have ironic, isolated distance. **The Berlin Years** are the results of the payoff of that journey, with **Low** an album of music he made for Earth thinking they would need a score from him, but passed on.

This new DVD from the ever-prolific **Under Review** series is again very thorough about the period, including his send-up of fascism being interpreted as an embracing of some kind. If this is not Rock Music, it is the most Rock-oriented experimental mainstream work one could imagine from the time and its influence informed everything from New Wave (along with Glam and early bands taking advantage of that, like New Zealand's Split Enz) and there is the added bonus of Bowie becoming an early innovator of what we now know as Music Video since the taste of cinema beyond concert films was just too much, especially when stimulated by Roeg.

This DVD is a must-see, chronicles well the period and there is a Plastic Years DVD companion we will cover soon. Remarkably, there is little in the way of analysis of Bowie on disc, so it is good to see when someone set out to tackle the subject, they did it so well.