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## David Bowie

### Under Review 1976-1979: The Berlin Trilogy [DVD]

(Sexy Intellectual Production)

US release date: 6 September 2007

UK release date: 6 November 2006

by Michael Keefe

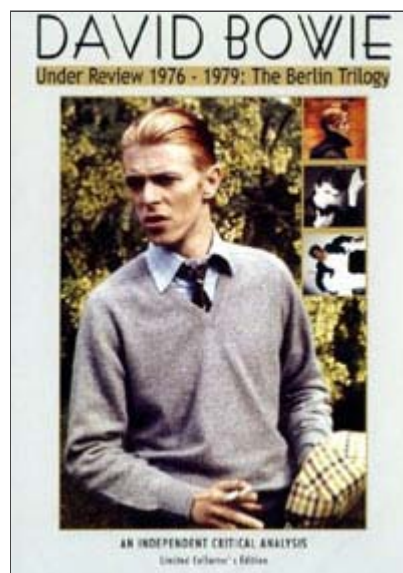
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In 1977 disco was all the rage and its simplistic, feel-good vibe, along with the huge success of Fleetwood Mac's laid-back pop / rock album, *Rumours*, seemed to signal the arrival, or perhaps the numbing, of a mostly placid record-buying public. Even heavy metal was fairly tame during this period. But 1977 was also the year punk rock exploded and the beginnings of new wave began to emerge. This was the galvanizing of an alternative movement that had been burbling under the surface, percolating in different forms in England, the US, and Germany throughout the decade.

Commanding the center of it all was David Bowie. All the music of the era was filtered through him, either via his voracious appetite for new sounds or through his wide influence on his contemporaries and followers. Glam, Iggy, soul, androgyny, Eno, kraut, alien, heroine, Ziggy, thin, white, duke, Reed, rock, Lennon, London, Los Angeles. He passed through it all, and it all passed through him. And all of these people and places and personae culminated in his escape to Berlin and the two 1977 albums he recorded there, *Low* and *"Heroes"*. This British DVD documentary, *Under Review 1976 - 1979: The Berlin Trilogy* is about that pair of amazing twin records and their uneven successor, *Lodger*, that followed two years later.

The first half hour of this low budget, 85 minute documentary is spent, however, building up to its subject matter. Without a doubt, David Bowie's career has always been framed largely by the ch-ch-ch-ch-changes he's undergone, each metamorphosis a shifting in style from what he'd presented as his sound and vision during his previous incarnation. It is right, then, that the nameless and faceless crew at Sexy Intellectual should preface Bowie's flight from LA to Berlin with the period just prior to his new adventure. But to devote more than a third of the DVD to Bowie's 1976 output, the album *Station to Station* and the film *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, is to greatly overemphasize the importance of each.

Even within the documentary, the conclusions derived by the ad hoc panel of Bowie experts assembled is that, from *Station to Station*, only the motoric title track could be said to presage Bowie's departure from the plastic soul of his Thin White Duke stage, while *The Man Who Fell to Earth's* biggest impact on the Bowie of the near future was the contribution of the album cover for *Low* and the bass line for the track "Subterraneans", which was originally intended for use in the film's soundtrack. Appropriately, though, some time is devoted to Bowie's co-writing and co-production efforts on Iggy Pop's pair of great 1977 albums, *The Idiot* and *Lust for Life*. Both men were deeply damaged by drug use in 1976, and the trip to Berlin was a joint attempt to clean up together. While this notion seems ludicrous and should have resulted in even greater reinforcement of more debauchery, the clear result was an astonishing period of intensely fruitful productivity.



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The sub-subtitle for this DVD is *An Independent Critical Analysis*, and, true to that, it is structured almost entirely around the expressed opinions of a clutch of British music journalists and musicians. These men (yes, unfortunately, they're all men) vary widely in their abilities to drive the narration. Foul-mouthed and cranky, rock author and former *NME* writer Paolo Hewitt is hilarious. Composer David Toop, on the other hand, is beyond dull; his meek and depressive nature sucking the life out of every moment of screen time he's given. Fortunately, the perpetually upbeat journalist and musician Chris Roberts helps keep the pace lively, even if it does take a while to get used to hearing him speak extemporaneously with the same syntax and vocabulary usually reserved for the written word of the rock critic.

Mark Pendergrast, author of the fabulous book *The Ambient Century*, offers fine insight into Bowie's star collaborator during the Berlin years, ambient music pioneer and producing legend Brian Eno. His role in the documentary is, however, overemphasized. Sure, he contributed to all three records, both through some co-writing and synth playing. But this was all under the direction of David Bowie and, in no small part, Tony Visconti, the man who actually produced *Low*, *"Heroes"*, and *Lodger*. While the filmmakers make sure to credit Visconti correctly (Brian Eno is often thought to have produced the records), they undermine this by devoting a lot of time to Eno's role, even discussing, in a bonus featurette, his involvement with Bowie again in 1995 (this time actually producing), on the weird, long, dark, and winding *Outside*. What they somehow fail to mention, though, is that Tony Visconti, too, has since reunited with Bowie, producing his two most recent studio albums, 2002's *Heathen* and 2003's *Reality*, which account for the best music Bowie has issued since '80's *Scary Monsters*. Although kraut rock bands like Cluster and Neu! are given their due on the DVD, Visconti is the man who imbued Bowie's Berlin records with their dense yet rubbery sounds; their springy, rocking paranoia.

Despite these sins of omission and overemphasis, the documentarians and the journalists interviewed here capture well the magical powers of the music contained on the trio of albums at the heart of this film. Mostly, they rhapsodize about the impact, both immediate and to the future of music, of *Low* and *"Heroes"*. And rightly so. Without the desperate and anxious rock carved out on these records, it would be hard to imagine the existence of many of the great bands who have since emerged, from seminal post-punkers Joy Division to contemporary indie art rockers TV on the Radio. I, too, could rhapsodize all day about this duo of discs, but this has been done elsewhere and in great amounts. I suppose *Under Review* merely adds to the glut, but it's fun to see these guys getting excited about this excellent music, all the same.

Sadly, they glaze over the subsequent tour, captured on the oft-maligned 1978 live album, *Stage*, a document greatly improved with its re-sequenced 2005 reissue. (Although opinions differ on this, as evidenced in our own [PopMatters review](#).) Of great note, super-guitarist Adrian Belew was recruited for this tour, having recently been discovered by Frank Zappa. Flashes of his presence, captured at the Beat Club in Germany appear briefly in the footage on the DVD.



David Bowie - Beat Club 1978 pt.3 of 5

He would subsequently play on the final album of the Visconti / Eno / Berlin trilogy, 1979's dark, sometimes muddled, Eastern-flavored *Lodger*. Unlike its predecessors, the locale of its recording seemed much more incidental to the album's sound. The local kraut rock flavor was far less apparent than those of Arabia. Although still physically in Germany, Bowie had moved on. *Lodger* is much less a follow-up to "*Heroes*" than a warm-up for *Scary Monsters*. Whereas the 1977 albums were famously constructed with distinctly different moods for each side of the LP (rock on A, soundscapes on B), *Lodger* was, in construct, a standard-issue rock album, with all of its 10 tracks, most running around three to four minutes, devoted to verse-chorus-verse songs with a beat. That a lot of the melodies were astringent and not easily digestible to Western ears is just Bowie being Bowie—always pushing the envelope.

It makes for a neat package to lump the three albums chronicled in this documentary together. Still, despite coincidences in personnel and location, sonically, *Lodger* doesn't match up well with *Low* and "*Heroes*". The folks at Sexy Intellectual bow down to the lore of the trilogy, but those they interview about *Lodger* also argue against the handy marketing tie-in provided by circumstance. Its inclusion here, though, does successfully mirror the unnecessarily long build-up in the DVD's first third. I choose to view this documentary as being about the awesome twin impact of *Low* and "*Heroes*". The rest is all just context.

Despite the low-tech production value of the film, the enthusiasm of the critics therein (well, aside from David Toop) is infectious and will only deepen your appreciation for the music being profiled. Sure, I would have loved actual video footage of Bowie being interviewed, rather than audio over cheesy stock footage of reel-to-reels and VU meters. But I enjoy being left with a craving for more. To that end, the DVD's best bonus feature (there aren't many) is "The Hardest David Bowie Interactive Quiz In The World Ever". And that title is probably accurate. Along with my wife, who's also a huge fan, we scored only a "mediocre" 12 out of 25 (partly because I talked her out of one correct answer). The quiz adds a little extra fun to an already enjoyable experience. It's an experience, however, that feels like it should be free, perhaps discovered while channel surfing on late-night cable. Unless you're already a huge fan, it would be hard to justify laying out the cash for the hit-and-miss budget documentary *Under Review 1976 - 1979: The Berlin Trilogy*.



David Bowie - Heroes

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